A Buddhist *Journal*

GUIDED PRACTICES FOR WRITERS AND MEDITATORS

Beth Jacobs, PhD

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About North Atlantic Books

A Buddhist Journal

Guided Practices for Writers and Meditators

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North Atlantic Books
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Praise for A Buddhist Journal

"In this kaleidoscopic invitation to unfolding, whether on the cushion or with the pen, Beth Jacobs has written the book that I wish had been available when I began teaching journaling in meditation programs. Honoring the roots and branches of both meditation and expressive writing, paying homage to the lineage and integrity of each, this work offers the exercises that expand, deepen, and integrate the practices. It is an offering of rich illumination and wisdom."

—DEBORAH ROSS, LPC; CERTIFIED JOURNAL THERAPIST; AND COAUTHOR, WITH KATHLEEN ADAMS, OF *YOUR BRAIN ON INK*

"A Buddhist Journal is a wonderful guide to writing more deeply and living from the heart. Beth Jacobs offers insightful commentary along with writing exercises that lead one to directly experience some of the basic teachings of Buddhism. Words can sometimes point toward experience that goes beyond words that is 'infinite and unknowable.' I'm reminded of a Buddhist nun who described her meditation practice as a letting go of the clenched fist of the mind to fall into everything. This book will nourish the creativity of any writer, Buddhist or not."

—JAMES JANKO, AUTHOR OF *THE CLUBHOUSE THIEF AND BUFFALO BOY AND GERONIMO*

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FOR CLAY & TARA

with Avalokiteshvara’s light and listening.

Also by Beth Jacobs

The Original Buddhist Psychology: What the Abhidharma Tells Us about How We Think, Feel, and Experience Life

Paper Sky: What Happened After Anne Frank's Diary Ended

Writing for Emotional Balance: A Guided Journal to Help You Manage Overwhelming Emotions

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Preface

Why a Writing Practice? The Value of a Guided Journal for Buddhists

THERE is a common skewed perception that because Buddhism values stillness and silence, there is no place for writing in Buddhist practice. In one article, Norman Fischer ironically calls writing a “bad habit for a Zen priest.”[1] A Zen story describes a young monk who sets fire to his written teachings. When the Zen master asks how he could burn this “extremely rare and esoteric and precious” text, the monk replies, “After examining it, I fully comprehended its meaning. There was no use keeping the text.”[2] From one angle, there is a valid question about the use of writing in the context of pervasive impermanence and the search for an awareness unbounded by words.

Yet Buddhism is a prolific writing religion and has produced an exceptional richness of written expression. Some of the rare beauty of Buddhist writing is due to the same reasons given for it being seemingly pointless. Deep experience *is* beyond words, but writing doesn’t just convey information. It causes things to happen, things that change both the writer and the reader forever. In the words of the philosopher, Candrakirti, “What hearing and what teaching is there of a Dharma without words? Yet what is without words *is* taught and heard.…”[3]

Because Buddhist writing is in the context of a search for deeper truth, the events it tends to inspire are often more surprising and lively than most writing. Buddhist writing is delivered with the condensation of poetry; it startles, suddenly reverses the direction of thought, slams the reader to the mat. Buddhist writing appreciates and manipulates the qualities of language because of its understanding of language itself as a process within a bigger view of the mind.

If language is seen as a creative vehicle of the flow of consciousness, then written language is the vehicle’s owner’s manual, roadmap, and

tourist souvenir all at once. Writing doesn’t just freeze language. It is a particular usage, or many usages. Writing extracts communication from an immediate and bodily interpersonal context. This purifies word usage and intent. But, writing doesn’t just transform language into visual symbol and preserve words. Writing turns language into a quiet experience for the recipient, and the experience is different for each reader and each reading.

In this view of language, the process of writing itself is especially alive. As writing expresses an aspect of the mind, it creates another. By turning language into a product, we create a vital partner to our own processing of reality. Our writing and mind are in an echo chamber, affecting each other and providing an infinite regression of mutual influence, or, in Buddhist terms, manifesting interdependent origination. This is why personal writing, or journaling, is so popular and important. It forces a private but essential articulation of vague internal processes, while it allows both intentional and surprising development of those processes.

There are as many ways to be Buddhist as there are practitioners, since each person must internally and individually come to “terms” with inexpressible truth. In some Buddhist philosophies, this might be called “finding a conventional reality within an absolute reality.” In a popular usage, this resonates with what is sometimes noted as the Buddha’s last words: *Be a lamp unto yourself.*

This is why Buddhist teachers frequently recommend practice journals for students to augment the awareness that blooms within sitting and studying practices. And this is why a guided journal within a Buddhist practice has such powerful potential. Writing takes the tools we have at hand and uses them to dig in the world that is without a speck of dust.

Section 1
The Formal Practice

MEDITATION and writing practices are both formal activities that invite freedom. The exercises of meditation, mindfulness training, and personal writing rely on structure and repetition while they court surprise and revelation. All of these processes open awareness because they purposefully leave time and space for the unknown.

The unknown, however, moves through many different media. For some meditators, the idea of assigning words to the processes of deep concentration is a type of destruction. There is no space for or purpose to words in total immersion in the present moment or in very deep meditative states. Conversely, some writers see little creative energy in the nonproductive stance of a meditation practice. Conceptually, writing and meditation can seem like expressive and receptive cousins, connected, but with opposing stances. Yet many people do both and there are obvious personality overlaps in the types of people who are drawn to both meditating and journaling due to the underlying similarities in the intent of the activities.

The histories of the two practices in the latter half of the twentieth century in America run in parallel tracks, despite their divergent origins. Meditation and mindfulness practices were formalized in the development of Buddhism starting about 500 BCE in India, and diary writing is first noted in travel journals popular in the Middle East in the tenth century CE. The two practices converged in American popularity in the 1960s and 1970s, when well-known artists brought largely academic interests to the imagination of the general culture.

In the 1920s and 1930s, D. T. Suzuki translated Zen Buddhist texts into English and began writing seminal books that explained the practices to English-speaking readers, and in 1938, Dwight Goddard wrote *A Buddhist Bible*, which became a significant influence for Jack Kerouac. Kerouac's novel *The Dharma Bums*, published in 1958, helped awaken a generation

to the possibilities of Buddhist ideas infiltrating American post-war culture, which itself was first recognizing many aspects of personal psychology and the individual suffering of stress.

Meanwhile, in 1959, Shunryu Suzuki arrived in San Francisco from Japan and the San Francisco Zen Center, an influential affiliation of Zen *sanghas*, or communities, opened in 1962. Also in 1959, the Dalai Lama was forced to flee Tibet with the aid of American CIA forces. A huge convergence of influences landed Buddhism in the American creative psyche, expressed through the Beat poets, the intellectual cutting edge, and even the Beatles, who went to India in 1968 and quoted *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* in their lyrics.

The artistic foothold of Buddhism in American turned more therapeutic in the 1970s. In 1976, Sharon Salzberg, Jack Kornfield, and Joseph Goldstein opened the Insight Meditation Center in Barre, Massachusetts, after many years of travel and practice in Buddhist traditions. This became a strong influence for Jon Kabat-Zinn, who developed mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) in 1979, an early, overtly secular and therapeutic application of Buddhist doctrine.

Medical research followed suit. Physiological research into meditation had begun in the 1950s, and by the 1970s, researchers such as Herbert Benson, Antoine Lutz, and Richard Davidson had shown that beneficial brain changes and metabolic relaxation were induced by the activities of Buddhist meditation.[1] The concept of *neural plasticity* offered a new promise that brains can be changed by practice.

Once the therapeutic benefits of meditation were demonstrated in the terms of American scientific empiricism, the popularity of Buddhist practices soared. Today the NCCIH (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, part of the NIH [National Institutes of Health]) estimates that 8% of American adults, or about 18 million people, use some form of meditation.[2] To date, at least 24,000 people have completed MBSR training.[3]

In the twenty-first century, some form of meditation will likely become the major psychotherapeutic intervention of choice, as psychotherapy was in the twentieth century. Freud had just completed and published *The Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis* in 1917, and the culture was

similarly caught up in the benefits of "talking therapy." We now see a counterpart—the benefits of a silent and more internal form of therapy for our ills.

Parallels between the cultural absorption of Buddhist principles and the therapeutic writing field reveal underlying cultural themes in the direction of inner exploration. In the 1950s, Ira Progoff studied depth psychology with Carl Jung, and in the 1960s, he introduced the Intensive Journal method of personal development. This was the first systematic approach that used journaling as a way to explore, as opposed to diaries being used as a way to record. Progoff systematized writing about life experiences to reveal underlying themes and continuities.

In the 1970s, expressive writing and journaling were popularized as therapeutic practices in much the same way as meditation and mindfulness practices had been. Influential writers such as Christina Baldwin (a vipassana meditator), Tristine Rainer, and Kay Adams wrote books that taught people to use their own writing to see more deeply into who they are and what their lives mean. They brought formal and technical ideas into the journal to heighten the illuminating capacities of writing.

Research bolstered this practice in much the same way as it bolstered meditation practices. In the 1980s, a fortuitous study by James Pennebaker showed that small doses of therapeutic writing about traumatic events related to decreased physical illnesses in a college population. The basic research design of this study became known as the *Pennebaker paradigm*, and the design was used in hundreds of studies on topics ranging from T-cell count to depressive symptoms to the occupational functioning of engineers. These types of studies have continued into the present, with more detailed analyses of factors, but the basic idea, that expressive writing causes beneficial changes, is well documented.[4] And the popularity of journal writing thrives in both the creative and scientific support of the activity.

Journaling and meditating grew up together in America and both are well past the formative stages of being discovered and appreciated by the current culture. Both fill a need for a venue for development that is rooted in a deep interior and sacred context. The practices augment each other

and fit together like “a box and cover joining,” in the words of a classic Zen poem, *Sandokai*, by Sekito Kisen.

In this section, the exercises focus on linking the formal practices of meditation and writing. The exercises refer to the practices as the practices enrich the writing. These exercises reveal the common underpinnings of both practices. Focusing, being still, being silent, writing alone and freely—all open awareness of process. All are zones of spontaneity, exploration, and multiplicity. All reveal our current states for what they are, momentary and elemental. These practices put our experience in context, instead of allowing us to feel like we are our experiences, and this loosens the strict divisions between subject and object.

Both meditation and expressive writing are grounds for intent as opposed to attainment. When intention is set toward openness and exploration, we create a bridge between a theoretical understanding and an applied experience, between a practice and its creative, flowing source.

Section 1, Exercise 1—Before and After

In this exercise, you will get a feel for the interplay of meditation and writing, with a before and after meditation “free write.” You will need a half hour of quiet time without interruption, which is not an easy thing to obtain, for starters.

First, set a timer or use a timer app and get ready to write loosely for ten minutes. In a free write, you just try to keep the physical activity of writing going and allow the content to be as spontaneous and unevaluated as possible. Don’t worry at all about form, grammar, spelling, manners, style, or even legibility. Even if you start writing “I don’t know what I’m doing” over and over, you will find that something else breaks through to the surface eventually.

A beautiful description of free writing comes from Tristine Rainer’s *The New Diary*. She says, “Write fast, write everything, include everything, write from your feelings, write from your body, accept whatever comes.”[1] She emphasizes the physical and the nonjudgmental power of writing. This is a great means of both emotional release and access to unconscious or barely conscious material.

Begin your first free write.

Free Write # 1—Before

Now, get up and stretch or walk around for a bit.

When you have finished, settle down for at least ten minutes of meditating. Again, set the timer and use any style you know and like; if you don’t have one available, try a simple sitting and breathing meditation, where you focus on the process of breathing in a stable posture. If you are comfortable doing so, sit on the edge of a cushion in a cross-legged position. If not, sit on a chair, but try to keep your spine

upright and place your hands comfortably on your lap or knees. Gaze downward at about a forty-five-degree angle, without straining your eyes to focus.

Try to breathe from very deep in your abdomen, and start by noticing every detail you can about the processes of inhaling and exhaling. As you sit, don't try to accomplish, control, or actually concentrate that much on any particular thing, but try to be aware of what arises. Just note all the sensations, thoughts, feelings, memories, plans, and stories, and then let them dissolve on their own. When you need to re-anchor yourself, come back to noticing breathing and what that feels like.

When the timer goes off, again stretch or walk around a little and return for one more timed ten minutes of free writing.

Free Write # 2—After

Before you reread your two free-write samples, take a minute and jot down what you predict might be different about them:

Now, read through your writing and see if your prediction is true. Sometimes the difference is only in how it felt to be writing and it doesn't show up so much in the writing samples themselves. On the other hand, sometimes there are startling differences between the two writing samples in terms of size of writing, speed of production, depth of content, or emotional tone.

Both writing and sitting meditation have ways of clearing the dross from the surface mind and promoting a deepening and broadening of experience. Writing promotes mindfulness by the naturally engrossing and illuminating qualities of the activity. Even if we are just taking dictation,

we use most areas of our brain to encode, organize, and produce language in written form. The automatic and physical process of writing can draw content that is not the focus of surface awareness. There is an automatic integrating quality in writing and an almost magical relieving sense of the release of our inner world onto the screen or page.

Some people describe a regular, open-writing ritual as being a form of meditation. Others believe that meditation requires literal stillness and an absolute lack of productivity and see a writing practice as a form outside of the definition of meditation. In this exercise, you can get a sense of how sitting affected your writing, but you can also compare how free writing and sitting affect the mind’s depth of processing experience.

Take a moment and jot down your observations on this important alignment of the practices of writing and meditation. Great benefits of these two practices overlap. The practices can augment each other and add exponentially to life’s experiences.

Section 1, Exercise 2—Four Steps to a Sip of Water

The *Satipatthana Sutta*, The Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness, spells out details of different ways to approach four different areas of mindfulness: of the body, of feelings, of the mind itself, and of *dharmas*, or mental objects. The four different areas of mindfulness are each approached in four ways, or with four useful parameters. You can be mindful contemplating each domain internally, externally, or both. You also can be mindful contemplating the nature of the arising and falling away of phenomena, or both, in each area. The amount of mindfulness in each area should be enough for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness and no more. And finally, mindfulness in each area should still allow you to “abide independently,” not clinging to anything or to the awareness you acquire. This structure of four areas and four methods is a lifetime study but an important framework to remember in the development of mindfulness.

The structure tells us that part of mindfulness is appreciating our experiences in different domains and another part is appreciating it within different structural frameworks. We become aware of the different scales of our experiences, from subtle internal senses to gross bodily postures, or from a slight feeling of preference to a huge emotional craving. Awareness can be arranged on many different dimensions. If we start with the body, it is still surprising to realize the variety of impressions, sensations, and processes that are available in any given moment. This exercise will narrow focus to a small event and break it into four steps to illustrate the richness of a simple bodily experience.

Get a cup of water and place it on a desk or table in front of you.

1. Look at the water. Write down loosely and quickly what your body feels like right now:

2. Pick up the cup and place it to your lips so you feel the edge of the water. This position is a little awkward to hold, but feel it for a minute and focus on what it’s like; then put the cup down. Again, write whatever occurs to you about your bodily awareness:

3. Put a small bit of water in your mouth and hold it there without swallowing. What physical realities are you noticing now?

4. Go ahead and swallow. Feel the water flow into you and what it changes in your body once you have taken it in. Write down whatever you notice about your body now:

This mindfulness exercise helps you appreciate the detail that is available at any moment for focus and reflection. By jotting down observations at small points along the way, the bits of perception don’t simply flow into each other, with earlier experiences getting replaced. You see minute state changes laid out in front of you.

Did your observations change in these small steps? How many senses were involved? Did the focus of body awareness shift around the experience of viewing, feeling, and then taking in water? Try to recall this exercise whenever you do drink water and it will become a cue for a wider range of experience in the present moment.

Section 1, Exercise 3—Distraction Net

Part of any meditation is noticing the variety of events that occur in the mind. Whether you are meditating on a specific object or simply trying to observe what does happen in the mind, a series of impressions and sensations will move through awareness. You might consider these distractions or simply experience them without evaluation. In this technique, you modify meditation to try and capture these observations.

Sit quietly in any form of meditation with this journal or a pad of paper or a keyboard on your lap. If you don't have a form of meditation accessible right now, just focus very simply on breathing, on following the in and out of air.

As your mind settles, jot down one word or a short phrase, capturing a particular thought or sensation when it arises. Then repeat with another line when something else catches your attention to the point of being defined. Just stay with this for about two or three minutes. You might start with something like this:

Achy back

Quiet

What time is it?

Rick

Work problem

Anxiety

Bird song

Window frame

Blue chipped paint

Smelly

This is a literal exercise in plain notation without judgment. It will show you something about the quality and rate of your mental processes. In a few minutes, how much did you notice? How much seemed to escape your notation? What proportion of your lines are sensory images or emotions or thoughts? Is there anything recurring that is problematic and could use some outside work? If so, write a few paragraphs about that problem and, instead of trying to solve it, see if you can put some parameters around it.

You might also gain insight by categorizing your distractions: for example, if many of them are emotions, which ones; or, how many reflect positive or negative views of yourself?

Finally, very often, these lists can read like skeletons of poems, and if you’re so inclined, you might want to fill out some words and make your list into an ode to meditation.

Section 1, Exercise 4—Best Simile for the Mind

Poetry seems necessary to describe some meditative experiences. The condensation and dreamlike extrapolations of poetic form seem well suited to an essentially indescribable phenomenon. In this exercise, a simple poetic form, the simile, will be used to describe the activities of your mind in meditation.

Spend at least a few minutes in a meditation of your choice. If an idea helps, see Section 1, Exercise 1, for a description of a simple meditation technique. In your sitting, try to observe processes of the mind without manipulation or grasping, tracking, or following them. What are your thought processes like and what are they about? How do they move? What is going on besides thought? Step back, zoom out, and watch your mind work. Just try to notice the processes more than the content of thought, and return to the breath when you get lost.

After your meditation, think about what your experience of your mind's activities has been like. Look for a *simile* (an image with like or as; my mind is like a …, or, my mind is as … as a.…) to describe what your sitting was like. Think of mechanical objects (like a vacuum cleaner, like a windmill, like a train, like a Ferris wheel) or think of natural phenomena (like a blizzard, like a river, like a volcano). Think little (like a bug) or think big (like a galaxy). You might want to start with a list of possibilities if you find yourself bubbling with ideas. If so, write a list here and pick your favorite one to use for a writing piece:

Similes for My Mind

On the next page, write a poem or a prose piece filling in your image in the title. Elaborate on exactly how your comparison works, looks, feels to you. Describe possible implications of your image; for instance, if your mind is like a river, where does it flow and how do you navigate the rapids? Don't worry if you lapse into other poetic forms like metaphors or even if you start to rhyme.

When I sat, my mind was like/as.

Taking a vague sense of comparison and bringing it to the level of well-articulated imagery is a creative act. When you mix your meditation experience with such acts of creativity, you not only deepen your appreciation of what happens while you are sitting, you enrich the process and product of what you create. Finding the right formal language technique for a given moment unlocks creative energy.

Section 1, Exercise 5—Research Log

In a certain sense, all meditation is research. We are searching again and again to learn or to discover. Basic research design is often divided between cross-sectional studies and longitudinal studies. *Cross-sectional research* takes a snapshot at one point in time and looks at different variables across groups, such as symptom levels in groups of people on different medications. *Longitudinal research* follows one group or phenomenon over time, repeating measures to see how processes develop. In terms of personal meditation questions, cross-sectional research might look at depth interactions, like asking, “How are my emotions affecting my posture and depth of awareness as I sit right now?” Longitudinal research might ask more about how awareness is developing over time and what new experiences show themselves in meditation.

Most writing exercises fall into a cross-sectional paradigm. They look at current experience from a variety of angles. This exercise sets up your own longitudinal study of your meditation. The first step is to design your research measures. You want to ask yourself a few questions after you meditate for a period of several days, so think of very easy questions to answer that might yield interesting information over time. Another basic research principle is to make sure your measures don’t evoke resistance by being too long or complex.

Four questions with short responses might work well. The following is a suggested research instrument, but feel free to modify it or use your own design if you have other ideas or specific areas you are watching develop in your own meditation with some curiosity. If you are not established in a daily or regular meditation practice, you can ask questions about what influences whether you sit on a given day or not, such as “What is the main reason I didn’t meditate today?” or “On a scale of 1 to 10, how much did I want to meditate today?”

From Today's Meditation: Write down …

1. Something new that occurred to you

2. Something old that occurred to you

3. A quality of your breathing

4. A sensory observation

Reproduce your research questions in the simplest manner possible and try a research program for at least a few days. You can scan or copy the suggestions in the preceding box or write a few questions on a notepad or in a computer file. Without too much calculation or viewing of past answers, try to jot down something each day, or each time you meditate.

At the end of your data collection, you will write about your research on the next page. Put a bookmark there or dog-ear the page to remind yourself about this part of the research writing. What you will write will be the

Discussion section of your research report, the final step in standard research protocol. After the setup of the study is explained and the data are analyzed, researchers' creative moments arise when they can say what they found and what they believe their findings mean. You will do this after you collect data for a while.

Even if you only collected data for a few days in your meditation research project, lay out your findings in front of you and muse on them for a few minutes. Are there clear developments or random events? Do you feel that your study was influenced by outside events or variables that don't show up in your questions? Did you learn something from another form of repetition in practice where you evaluate in a formal manner? Use this page to write the **DISCUSSION** section of your personal research:

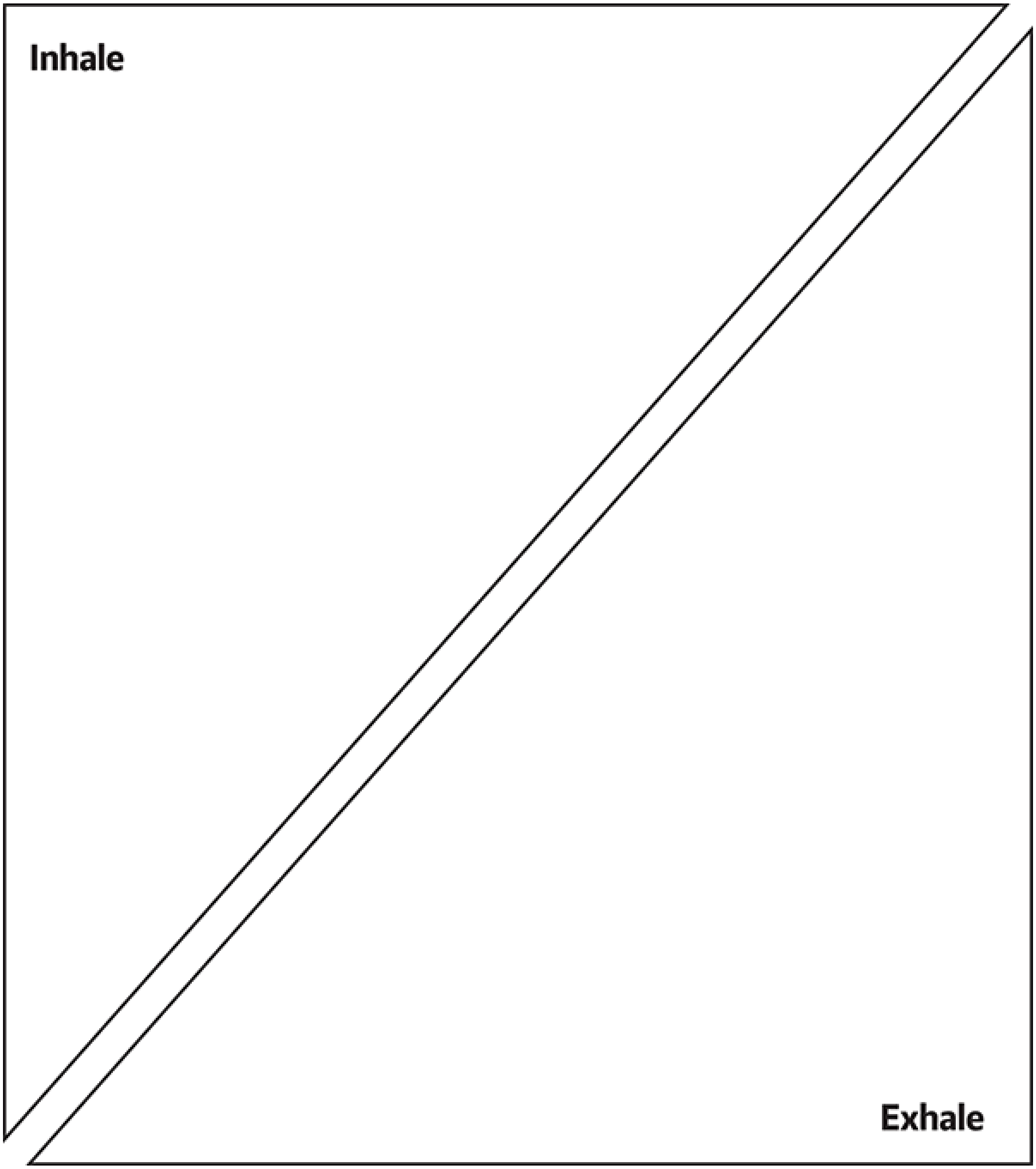
Section 1, Exercise 6—Inhalation and Exhalation

It is often said that breathing is a good focus for meditation because it is so portable and essential. It is certainly an ever-present and basic activity, and it is a mystery that is available for our observation and fascination. It also metaphorically contains almost everything we can ask about existence. Breathing hovers between conscious control and autonomic reactivity; between inner and outer exchanges; between closed and open systems. Breathing sustains us and yet makes us aware of our tenuous mortality and the constant movement toward the end of our lives.

A critical aspect of breathing, both metaphorically and mechanically, is the simple fact of inhalation and exhalation as a circular dialectic. When we inhale, we pull, we absorb, we expand. When we exhale, we push, we release, and we contract. In between, we sometimes miss a kind of magical switch where the tides turn. Inhalation and exhalation are everything opposite and everything collaborative.

For this writing exercise, you will explore the experienced difference between inhalation and exhalation. You will try to describe them separately.

To start, you might meditate on this difference for several minutes. Think about the bodily differences in these two experiences and also think about emotional and connotative differences. We all have basic associations to the difference between entry and exit; bringing something into the body, discharging something from the body. What sensory images come to mind? What psychological experiences? What reflexive emotions? Many people note that they are more able to be mindful with either inhaling or exhaling. Why might that be? Think about all of these subtleties as you sit and breathe for a while, and when you are ready, write about them on the next page. If you run out of room, spill onto more paper. If the form doesn't work for you, invent your own, or you might consider alternating lines: "Inhalation is …" "Exhalation is …"



This exercise gives a particular venue for experiencing more depth of awareness about breathing. The other beautiful fact of breathing is that while life goes on, it doesn't end, and infinite, unfolding realizations about this process are continuously available.

Section 1, Exercise 7—Written Mantra

Sutra copying is a practice that originated out of necessity in Buddhism and was always regarded as a form of merit. To focus on words of insight, to concentrate, to copy them, and to spread their availability are acts of both personal development and generosity. In some sanghas, this practice persists for its beneficial aspects. People often resist sutra copying in this age of reproducing with a click, but they are also often surprised by the intensity of the *samadhi*, or concentration, that evolves in careful copying of important writing.

This exercise will involve some copying, and you can choose to copy something important that you have read recently or to write an important mantra or phrase over and over. The idea of writing words on a page that are not your own is antithetical to journaling. It also might seem like a boring task at first. But there is something novel that the experience brings forward. First of all, it reminds you of the pure feeling of writing. Whether you use the keyboard or a pen or pencil, this physical act, without composition, is the base of the activity of writing. It is like examining just the body in a mindfulness contemplation, without any mental components.

A strange concentration does take over when copying words, and the power of the words has a feeling of leeching out onto the paper or screen and into the writer. You may notice aspects of phrases or words, or even curves of letters, that never occurred to you in the quick mental skim of a read.

You will definitely notice your resistance to this slow task and its demanding accuracy. Notice the content of mental intrusions and how they affect or temporarily derail the process of copying. This is a snapshot into the resistance to many practices. Let yourself notice all the ways you react to this task while you try to fill the next page with copying.

If you don’t have material you want to use, here are a few major Buddhist mantras that make for powerful copying:

- *Om Mani Padme Hum* (Tibetan homage to Kwan Yin, or in Sanskrit, *Avalokiteshvara*, meaning “Homage to the jewel in the

lotus.”)

- *Kwan Seum Bosal* (Korean name for Kwan Yin, Goddess of Compassion)
- *“Enmei Jukku Kanzeon Gyo”* (Japanese verse for health and prolonging life)

  Kanzeon

  Namu Butsu

  Yo Butsu U In

  Yo Butsu U En

  Bup Po So En

  Jo Raku Ga Jo

  Cho Nen Kanzeon

  Bo Nen Kanzeon

  Nen Nen Ju Shin Ki

  Nen Nen Fu Ri Shin

- Names of Buddha

  Vairochana Buddha, pure Dharmakaya

  Lochana Buddha, complete Sambhogakaya

  Shakyamuni Buddha, myriad Nirmanakaya

  Maitreya Buddha, of future birth

  All buddhas throughout space and time

  Lotus of the Wondrous Dharma, Mahayana Sutra

  Manjushri Bodhisattva, great wisdom

  Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, great activity

  Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, great compassion

  All honored ones, bodhisattva-mahasattvas

  Wisdom beyond wisdom, Maha-prajñaparamita

Written Mantra

Did you notice anything particular in your process of the written mantra? Take some space here for your own words and describe your process, which may illuminate reactions to other complex processes of concentration:

Whenever your studies need emphasis, you can return to this meditation of copying. It brings the words through you in a way that speech and thought glide over.

Section 1, Exercise 8—The Four Qualities around the Four Foundations of Mindfulness

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness, as laid out in the *Satipatthana Sutta* and as described briefly earlier in Exercise 2, are a core teaching of Buddhist practice. The “insight” of insight meditation rests on these four areas of attentiveness and awareness: form or body, feeling, mind or consciousness, and mental objects. This essential practice illuminates the truths of non-satisfactoriness, impermanence, and non-self, which allow for the liberation of conditioned, or manufactured, existence. We don’t cling to the things that we make up when we really see into and through them.

This teaching also instructs in a specific methodology of mindfulness that surrounds each object or area of focus. In an article on this topic, Joseph Goldstein discussed this aspect of the sutra that is frequently and easily overlooked.[1]

Sutras (or *suttas*) often have repetitive elements, which help emphasize points, but which also sometimes cause the reader to start to skim. Goldstein reminds us that the components of mindfulness of each object are repeated thirteen times in this sutra. For each area, the sutra directs us to contemplate the object internally, externally, or both; the object arising, passing away, or both; the object with just enough mindfulness to establish bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness; and the object independently, without any clinging. Goldstein’s emphasis on these directions enriches the practice of mindfulness.[2]

These directions link the objects of awareness and the realizations that ensue in specific ways. The first reminder is a look at the boundaries of self and a reminder of non-self; although we seem to exist inside of our perceptions, everything can be viewed from different angles—from inside, outside, or both. The second instruction is a view of impermanence. See the object, as solid as it might seem, as an arising and dissolving phenomenon. The next two instructions are teachings of bare mindfulness and non-clinging. Establish mindfulness just enough to stay with it and don’t start proliferating, associating, and evaluating. And finally, don’t

cling. Allow the objects to move in reality without grasping or reworking them. Buddha's primary injunction in some sutras is the idea of not clinging to anything. This reminds us to bring non-grasping even to moments of mindfulness.

This exercise focuses on these four useful qualities or dimensions of mindfulness in regard to any object. To start, pick an object of focus and meditate on it for at least several minutes. This object can be a literal object, like a rock or a picture, or it can be one of the big four areas of mindfulness that are outlined in the *Satipatthana Sutta*. You might just focus on the breath or watch incense smoke or listen to sounds. As you concentrate on whatever object you choose, try to hold the four qualities in your awareness also: be mindful internally and externally and both, be mindful of arising and passing away and both, be mindful just enough to be aware that you are mindful and no more, and be mindful without clinging. Holding these dimensions is a complex and advanced capacity of mindfulness, but try to work with the elements of awareness as you hold your object mentally.

When you are done, write about your object and the experience using these four dimensions. The following questions can serve as prompts or you can just note the residue of your observations and experience.

(write the name of your object for a title)

What was your sensory experience of the outside of the object? What was your sensory experience of the inside of the object? Which occurred to you first? How would you ever be able to experience both simultaneously?

How did you notice the object arising? How did you notice it passing away? What was the first sign of each? Again, how could you really

experience both? What is the felt difference between a fleeting sensory perception and an actual material object?

What did it take to maintain just enough awareness of this object? What made you notice you were over the top and starting to add to the bare experience? Did you ever go below the level of mindfulness necessary to maintain simple and even contact with the object?

Did you notice a kind of grasping to the object? What does that feel like compared to just being mindful? Did clinging feel emotional, physical, cognitive, or some other way? How did you stop it if you did notice it? How can you concentrate without a lot of thought?

(That is a key skill to observe!)

This is an original and vital breakdown of experience, and Goldstein reminds us beautifully in his article and books that the foundations of mindfulness are ways of mindfulness, and that mindfulness itself has its own complex life and activity.

Section 1, Exercise 9—Body Awareness and Tension Checks in Meditation

One thing most meditators notice is an increase in awareness of body sensation. Whether you focus on breath, a mantra, or pure process observation, being still and decreasing stimulation redistributes some focus to the body. We are generally used to ignoring many physical processes, such as balance and postural adjustments or irritating feelings of minor discomfort. Suddenly both, and more, become evident. As we sit longer on a particular occasion, tension often moves into muscle areas that aren’t used to supporting upright stillness.

Tension is natural at some point of the process, no matter how aligned a person can be in sitting. Where and how we tense up reflect both mechanical and emotional dynamics. It is illuminating to look carefully at the body messages felt in sensation and tension, which is the focus of this exercise.

First, sit for ten minutes in any posture that allows stillness for that length of time, if possible. If not, try a shorter timeframe. Focus on wherever there is tension in the body. You are going to fill in the following outline with shadings where you notice tension, so think about that as you take a few deep breaths and go into your body awareness meditation.

After you are done, mark the sitting outline with some indicator of the type and level of tension you felt in different parts of the body. (The outline can be a front or back view, depending on which captures your tense areas best). If you weren't sitting in a position like the one shown in the outline, you can extend it or just mark areas where you felt tight sensations regardless of the position in the drawing.

Where tension became actual aches or pain, use stronger or darker marks. If you are using pen or pencil, you can use different shading, hatch marks, or designs for different areas. If you are on a digital device, you can use the highlighter tool, employ a paintbrush fill-in tool, insert text art

or images, or play with inserting lines in an image-editing program. Spend a little time experimenting and try to enjoy the process of portraying the sensations you felt in this drawing.

Now, take a walk around your home or room or just take a few clearing breaths before returning to your drawing. Take a look at it. What is it telling you? Think about the location, method, and intensity of your drawing. Then write about what your drawing says, but don’t be too concrete, realistic, or clinical. So, for example, try to avoid a statement like, “There is moderate pain in my right shoulder.” Instead, say something like, “My right shoulder feels filled with heavy pebbles,” or “There is a cloud of grief lingering in my gut,” or “Intensity is radiating everywhere.” Write directly from the drawing.

This exercise uses a drawing to bridge your body and thought processes. Awareness of the body, once it is heightened, is most useful when it ties to deep emotional and creative processes. Some systems such as Focusing, developed by Eugene Gendlin, build those links with specific techniques and training over time. In this exercise, the drawing translates sensation into creative and less-familiar expressions that the cognitive process then reassembles. You can find a way to say what you feel that reveals more

than just noting tension here and there. Hopefully, the halves of the brain, the different components of the body, and the different aspects of experience integrate into a new awareness.

Section 1, Exercise 10—Mindfulness Cues for All Day

In Exercise 8 of this section, we looked at the qualities surrounding each content area of mindfulness. Being aware of when mindfulness is just enough and not too much paradoxically alerts us to when we lose attunement. A basic skill of mindfulness is the meta-awareness of the mind's activities—knowing when we have gotten caught up in something that hinders pure awareness.

If we can quickly catch the first peeling away from plain and present reality, the first drop of adornment or association or embellishment, then we can quickly return to the experience of the true now. Most meditators know that this isn't always possible and have had the experience of realizing that a particular story or musing, planning, or emotional state has been dominating mental processes for quite some time before mindful awareness set back in.

Sati, the original Pali word for mindfulness, "derives from a root meaning 'to remember,' but as a mental factor it signifies presence of mind, attentiveness to the present, rather than the faculty of memory regarding the past."[1] Once there is some feel for being more awake, we have to remember to get there, to be there, to return there. We monitor the mind itself. This is practiced in meditation and also when we are not in meditation. It is a constant striving.

Sometimes while we're learning, a bit of a device helps. Some people use electronic pings as mindfulness signals, but that runs into problems by annoying other people and by being a bit too external. In this exercise, you will train internal cues that are more resilient and discrete and are still persistent in the development of remembering to be present.

First, pick your dominant sense, whichever one you rely on the most for orientation and information. Then think of a common experience of that sense. For sight, it might be a particular color or a type of cloud; for sound, it might be something like cars going by or the sound of sirens if you live near a hospital or fire station; for touch, it could be the feel of the surface of a liquid or the contact of the bottom of your feet with soft

socks. Pick something that you encounter frequently and randomly, but not constantly. For instance, the color yellow might work better than green, brown, or gray, which are in most scenes.

Now, you are going to write a kind of mindfulness poem that is structured. Imagine or recall particular instances of your sensory experience. To continue with the earlier suggested examples, think of yellow vests on men in a truck, yellow flowers in the garden, a yellow shirt hanging in your closet, a stick of butter sitting on the counter, or blinker signals turning on and off. Or, imagine sirens in the dark of night, sirens getting louder as you see the red ambulance, sirens in the distance, wailing sirens like air raid sirens in World War II, and so on. Get imaginative and descriptive and write your list of sensory details on the beginning of each of these lines (before the word *signals*):

___________________________________ signals
___________________________________.

___________________________________ signals
___________________________________.

___________________________________ signals
___________________________________.

___________________________________ signals
___________________________________.

___________________________________ signals
___________________________________.

___________________________________ signals
___________________________________.

___________________________________ signals
___________________________________.

___________________________________ signals
___________________________________.

Now pick one word or just a few words that best capture you remembering to be awake, present, and alert to this moment in your life that you are so fortunate to occupy. The word might be simply *mindfulness*

or you might say, “I’m alive” or “being aware.” Write the word(s) you have chosen after the word *signals* on your lines. When you have finished, read your mindfulness poem out loud, preferably a few times.

By pairing this stimulus and response, you have trained a pathway in your brain, and both writing it down and saying it reinforce that pathway. Take a minute and imagine using this throughout your day. Think of hearing that sound or noticing that feeling or seeing what you imagined, and then recall this exercise, this poem, and the sense of mindfulness. Then just let it go. Your inner resources are in place and will do their work.

Section 2
The Slow Fade of the Self

THE BUDDHIST phrase *non-self* is an idea, a concept, a tenet, an ideal, but most of all, it is an experience that is acquired through paradox. It is clarified with thorough inward investigation and trained with great effort. It is also cultivated organically and appears spontaneously, often with awareness of the release of usual constraints. The experience of non-self might be noticed retrospectively by an absence of complications or obstructions. It's not so much "I did it!" as "That went more simply than it did before."

Eihei Dogen described this complex paradox plainly in the "*Genjokoan,"* a famous fascicle or spiritual essay in his revered collection, *Shobogenzo.* He said, "To learn the Buddha's truth is to learn ourselves. To learn ourselves is to forget ourselves. To forget ourselves is to be experienced by the myriad dharmas."[1] It takes a lot of study from many angles to release the grip of our self-constructs on our existence. These constructs, with their rigidity in time, their arbitrary selectivity, and their inflated sense of emotional necessity, are what block us from freedom to meet and greet the worlds and people we encounter.

In this language, Buddhist practice steps away most clearly from twentieth-century psychoanalytic theory. In the late twentieth century, *self psychology* was a developing branch of theory that emphasized important functions of self, such as development, observation, empathy, and mirroring. The ideas and related therapeutic techniques were very useful within the context of knowing the self. The *self* was understood as an organizing principle, carrying an essential and influential emotional tone, and the positive influence of allowing people to explore and express the subjective sense of being who they are in the moment was profoundly therapeutic.

The context of using this awareness to "forget ourselves" was missing in this psychotherapeutic school. The expressed self, soothed by

understanding and appreciation, immediately becomes something else and is an aspect of a state with causes and conditions that are endless in their origins and ongoing manifestations.

This broader context is the element of liberation. Needs that feel centrally dictated by a self are released and critical descriptors of the moment's experience become neutralized as time and dynamic interaction allow other experiences to arise. The self is composed of momentary conditions. Trying to fix the self is less useful than watching it as an aspect of vast dynamics. In Buddhist terms this is understanding *interdependent origination*—how everything arises in the convergence of innumerable and changing forces.

Viewing the self-construct in this way over time has indirect and sometimes surprising effects. The construct loosens and fades and only then does it seem clear how limited it was in the first place. The exercises in this section are designed to abet this process. Some illuminate examples and assumptions that have held concepts in place. Some actively rework the concepts.

A few exercises explain and focus on the concept of *skandhas* from early Buddhist philosophy. Skandhas are carriers of self-concepts, the actual experiential materials that we use to define who we are. These exercises look at how we use the concepts, and how they might confuse us. The idea with the skandhas, and with all self-concepts, is to understand these usages, not for the purpose of breaking them into pieces, but to lend them the flexibility that reality demands.

Self-concepts do have uses in navigating the world from within the bodily and psychological experiences of our lives. *Non-self* is not a destructive phrase; it is another effort to get a bigger perspective, to see *around* the phenomena that we are seeing *with*, and to allow that broadening and fluid action to alter process naturally.

Section 2, Exercise 1—I Am a Person Who …

The Buddhist idea of *non-self* is easily misunderstood and also easily understood without being felt. We do need the conventional pronoun *I* to stay intact in the world and even to try to develop along a Buddhist path. The non-self idea means that there is no unchanging, permanent, or perfectly delineated self, and although that makes sense, it is hard to let go of the idea that somehow, there is some core *me* that never lets up.

This exercise is one angle to help loosen the feeling of *I*. Start by writing a paragraph that begins.…

I am a person who ________________

Now, go through your paragraph and cross out every *I* and replace it with *Who*. Change every period to a question mark. Also correct verbs and possessive pronouns to make the sentences read correctly. For example, "I care about my pets very much." becomes the question "Who cares about her pets very much?" If you feel like your paragraph becomes too hard to read or you want to reinforce the differences, you can copy out the new version with questions:

Who ________________

Reread your paragraph and notice what is different about how you feel. Jot down what you notice.

This is just a shift in language, but shifting your own words this way will bring new light to the I who feels sure about who you are. This is a beginning level of examining the self-concept that we will develop in this section of exercises.

Section 2, Exercise 2—Shoes of My Life

There are so many ways that we orient ourselves in life and anchor our sense of self and reality. Most of these are taken for granted, built into our physical environment, activities, and culture. Loosening the self-concept depends on a kind of zooming out, like old-fashioned camera lenses. We want to disembed our sense of self from myriad habitual definitions.

Many of these definitions are very concrete. Think of how you get up in the morning and start to orient to a day and prepare your own body for the world. You might feel very strange if you didn’t brush your teeth or look in a mirror. But we very rarely look openly into a mirror. We are already scanning for particular things—like our eyes, so we can pop in contacts, or the wild morning hair that we might want to start working on taming. Before the day begins, we have physically prepared the self we thought we were the day before out of sheer habit.

This exercise looks at something that does anchor us to the ground and often anchors a sense of who we are—shoes. Not everyone cares about shoes, but most people have their identity tied up in some way with shoes, and in some ways that we rarely consider.

To start with, write a brief description of a pair of shoes you recall from each decade of your life. These can be boots or slippers or flipflops, dress shoes, or your favorite worn-out shoes. If you can’t recall a pair of shoes for a particular decade, write about how you remember your feet looking without shoes.

A pair of my shoes when …

I was a child (0 to 10):

I was a teenager:

I was in my 20s:

I was in my 30s:

I was in my 40s:

I was in my 50s:

I was in my 60s:

etc., or other shoes:

etc., or other shoes:

Now imagine all of these shoes in a row. Read your lines and really picture the little-kid shoes followed by your Converse High Tops and then your running shoes and your work shoes, or however your list went.

Try to write a statement that is true of every single pair of shoes in the line-up beyond that they are pairs of shoes. Is there really anything that is truly you in your shoe choices?

All of these shoes _________________!

Write for a bit more about shoes and what your shoes say about you and how permanent that truth does or does not feel. Let yourself move from the description to the implications. What would a detective know about you from looking at the lineup of shoes? Are there major inconsistencies in aspects of your self that are revealed by different shoes? Do the implications of your shoes fit who you feel you are now? If not, why doesn't the shoe fit?

My Shoes and My Self

Section 2, Exercise 3—Skandha Check

A *skandha* is a vital concept from original Buddhism that defines how we construct a self from natural and ongoing processes. Seeing how we put the idea of a self together doesn't mean we need to dismantle it. We just become more flexible with the self and how it functions and changes from moment to moment.

A skandha is a category of material our minds use to construct a sense of reality. Constructing a building could require exterior materials, structural components, internal hardware, and surface treatments. The endless job of constructing a human sense of a self and a framework for the world also requires some categories of material, based on different modes of experience. The five skandhas are material form or body, feeling, perception, mental formation, and action of consciousness. In original Buddhism, understanding the conditional or empty nature of this list was considered a primary key to enlightenment.

Form means all physical states of being a body. *Feeling* in this list is not complex emotion, but a raw, bimodal, approach/avoid reactivity built into every moment. *Perception* refers to all sensory input. *Mental formations* are not just thoughts, but habitual structures of mental process, like obsessiveness or internal dialogue. *Action of consciousness* is a translation of the complex Pali word, *citta*. This refers to the flow of consciousness—a series of raw, unprocessed moments of awareness plainly touching on objects.

We select and bundle our experience in these packages as a natural way to stay oriented and focused in our world. The point of thinking through the skandhas is to avoid taking this defining process for granted. We could notice an entirely different selection of stimuli. We could rearrange the self at any moment. In fact, the self *is* rearranging at every moment and not clinging to any aspect or pattern keeps the moments moving more smoothly.

In this exercise, you will write about yourself in terms of the skandha divisions. Some questions are provided to help you define just what is in

each category. Describe yourself as you are now, trying to separate and delineate experience in each skandha.

Form: How's your physical body? What internal and external sensations (not perceptions) are noticeable when you scan? Which ones push into awareness first? How do you feel oriented in space, in your clothes?

Feeling: What small emotions are swirling within you? What little details feel fun to you and which cause a slight recoil; which do you want to experience more and which do you want to push away? Which are dominant? What is the general feeling tone that they add up to?

Perception: What sensory perceptions are your objects of focus? Think through all five senses. Which senses or types of perceptions do you go for first and which do you tend to ignore?

Habit Formation: How would you describe the style of your thinking right now? How are you processing the mental input of the moment? What familiar patterns of reactivity can you observe? What pre-existing strategies and intentions are affecting your thought processing?

Action of Consciousness: This is the hardest one to describe or even to question. *Consciousness* here is the smallest bit of awareness touching on some bit of reality. Consider that the early Buddhists estimated that you experience about sixty consciousness objects in one second. How would you describe the active state of your consciousness or awareness right now? For instance, does conscious processing feel intensely concentrated or wispy; choppy or flowing; energized or sluggish? Feel free to get poetic. How are you doing or moving as a sentient being in the universe of possibilities for conscious experience?

This is one way to break down the experience of a self. You have probably been exposed to many other systems of conceptual divisions like this, from Freudian psychology to astrology to Myers-Briggs tests. This list has extra validity due to the thousands of meditative hours that inspired it. The idea is to break it down so that you don’t grasp onto it. We waste lots of energy if we over-value the construction of the moment, and

we miss opportunities if we forget the broader range of possibilities that is always there.

Section 2, Exercise 4—Skandha Shift

After completing the Skandha Check in Section 2, Exercise 3, you should have a feel for the division of reality represented by the five skandhas; material form or body, feeling, perception, mental formation, and action of consciousness. We can build on the insights of this basic Buddhist structure by shaking it up in a few different ways. Essential insight is acquired by examining this structure of our construction of reality. But looking at it more closely, rearranging a few of the moving pieces, will help decrease clinging to the structure. And it is the manner of usage that gets us into trouble more than the structure itself.

First of all, which skandha do you rely on the most? This may be the one you had the easiest time describing in the prior exercise. Do you tend to experience everything through your body, getting a headache if you think too hard or a stomachache when you’re nervous? Do you tend to dwell in emotions and feel wide ranges of intense feelings? Are you constantly occupied with your sensory perceptions, tripping over things because of something beautiful that caught your eye, or being flooded with memory because of a smell you noticed? Or, do you rely on mental formations, strategizing and planning, maybe getting caught in narrative or volitional activities? Finally, those raw actions of consciousness remain hard to categorize, but do you feel like you are just floating through fragments of impressions and thoughts, following strings of consciousness events?

Now, in a similar way, think of the skandha you rely on the least, the one that is most difficult to relate to and imagine. Which skandha description captures the least of your experience?

You are going to spend some time in that unaccustomed skandha to try and comprehend how there really are so many possible ways to categorize and organize reality. For this exercise, first do two short meditations. Take a few deep breaths and really concentrate on your favorite or most familiar skandha. Spend a few minutes entirely focused on your reality in that skandha. Try to return to that skandha any time your attention wanders and define the momentary states of that skandha.

Then take a few more deep breaths, do a radical shift, and give equal time and attention to that least-comfortable and known skandha. Try to define your state, self, and continuous experience in the terms of that skandha as much as possible. Notice how the two meditations might feel different in themselves.

After you have done these meditations, write about yourself in the terms of the second meditation. Try to describe your whole self and personality in only the terms of that least-familiar skandha, as if you were introducing yourself to someone with only those materials for information.

This is who I am based only on ________________.

This is a *skandha shift*. Does this description capture you in an unaccustomed way? Do you feel you’re missing information, or did you notice something novel because you were forced to work in only this domain? A skandha shift is one of the most important actions you can do to free yourself of customary ways of being in the world and unproductive grasping of structure. Sometimes you can simply run through the skandha list when you feel unbalanced in some way, and it tends to result in a more grounded feeling. During your day, sometimes it can be refreshing to just change the skandha channel.

Section 2, Exercise 5—Chart of Personality Errors

For our final shake-up of the skandha system, we are going back to classical Buddhist concepts. In early Buddhist writing, there are charts and sutras about how *identity view,* or an overly rigid definition of self, comes to be. There are four essential errors that we make with the skandhas that cause us to misuse these categories to construct a self, as opposed to using the categories to experience life's ongoing movement. The commentaries list four *personality views,* or ways to get mixed up in or by the skandhas. They are: mistaking the skandha *for* a self, thinking the self *has* the skandha or owns it, thinking the self is *in* the skandha, or thinking the skandha is *in* the self.[1] This list applied to the five skandhas makes a 4×5 chart of erroneous assumptions of self based on the skandhas.

The following chart is set up just like that. Try filling it in with notions, impressions, or experiences you've had in each category to make the concepts real and personal. Here are some examples:

- How might you feel like you own perception (self *has* skandha #3)? This might be like the person who is always taking pictures of plates of food before she eats.
- Or, extreme paranoia can become a self inside a mental formation (self is *in* skandha #4).
- Depression might be the self *in* the feeling skandha #2.
- The idea "I am what I think" could illustrate skandha = self in the actions of consciousness row, skandha #5.

You might not have examples for each skandha assumption, but try to think through the chart and see which ones make sense in your experience. Then jot down a few words that describe each specific instance.

Twenty Skandha Assumptions

	Skandha = Self	**Self *Has* Skandha**	**Self Is *in* Skandha**	**Skandha Is *in* Self**
Form				
Feeling				
Perception				
Mental Formation				
Actions of Consciousness				

This complex chart might be a lot to digest, but hopefully it will give you a few ideas about ways that you assume parts of you are more substantial than they really are upon close inspection. Take one instance from this chart or these ideas and write a bit about how that causes problems for you. This is really a way of rooting out rigidity and seeing where your inner perceptions of your self lock up. Wherever that happens, something in life will get frozen or some interactions will go awry. By writing about your own experiences in this way, you will automatically release some of this internal paradigm.

Section 2, Exercise 6—Meditations to Decrease Sensual Clinging

Very early Buddhism was preoccupied with sensory experience. There was a great deal of analysis of the mechanics and uses of our sensory equipment. The philosophy in no way rejected sensory experience or encouraged stifling of sensory input. Buddha himself rejected extreme ascetic practices before his enlightenment, and he adopted a stance that became known as the *Middle Way*, accepting neither nihilism nor eternalism, neither rejection nor grasping of experience.

Sensory experience is a great deal of where consciousness operates. It is how we experience the present environment and process our universe. As described in the discussion of the skandhas earlier, Buddhism's message is that sensory *clinging* is where we run into problems. Sometimes the line between appreciation and clinging seems hard to discern. The early Buddhists were blunt about breaking through clinging. Meditations designed to help with that problem seem pretty gruesome by most standards in our current era.

An early treatise on Theravadan Buddhist doctrine, written by Buddhaghosa in about the fifth century CE, outlines some meditations specifically designed to decrease sensual clinging. The meditations in this area start intensely, with a focus on the foulness of ten types of corpses.

> Now, ten kinds of foulness, [as corpses] without consciousness, were listed next after the kasiṇas thus: the bloated, the livid, the festering, the cut up, the gnawed, the scattered, the hacked and scattered, the bleeding, the worm infested, a skeleton.[1]

This shocking meditation idea was suggested at a time when people were exposed to corpses and charnel grounds in a way that is very uncommon now, but even in fifth-century India, the meditator was confronted heavily with aversive imagery about the body. The text does recommend having a teacher help the beginner in this meditation.

The list of meditation topics continues with considerations of the live body in various parts and in very specific detail. For instance, one part of

the body, the flesh, is broken down into sections and described:

> There are nine hundred pieces of flesh. As to *colour*, it is all red, like *kimsuka* flowers. As to *shape*, the flesh of the calves is the shape of cooked rice in a palm-leaf bag. The flesh of the thighs is the shape of a rolling pin."[2]

The details go on for many pages.

These meditations specifically encourage contemplation of the repulsive, but they seem most powerful in conveying the tangible and impermanent nature of the human body. What hits hardest, and maybe most usefully, is the reminder that the body is a concrete thing, not necessarily a disgusting thing. Physical transience is so easy to forget.

For this writing exercise, the focus is sensory transience. Pick a natural physical object, like a tree, river, flower, or even a rock, or pick a part of your body, like your eyes, hands, or legs. Then describe ways this object or part of you changes over time. The scale of time depends on the object. It could mean eons of imagining a rock crumble, two days of a flower fading in a vase, or ten years of legs losing their athletic definition. In your writing, try to be dispassionate, so that aging or changing is neither disparaged nor glorified. Try to just describe in accurate detail an evolution of change in an object or part of your own body.

Watching Change in ________________

The beautiful paradox in this exercise is that paying close attention actually decreases clinging. Clinging comes from the additives we put into our perceptions and pure observation of change brings a clarity that encourages acceptance. Acceptance naturally contradicts grasping.

Section 2, Exercise 7—Molecular Experiences of Attachment/Aversion

Feelings are very important in Buddhist practice, although emotion is understood quite differently than it is in Western psychology. As you may have seen in prior exercises, feelings are the second skandha, or category of material, for personal construction of a reality framework. Feelings are also the second area of investigation in the four foundations of mindfulness. That is because of the profound emotional mobility we can develop if we understand how we experience and use feelings.

Feeling, particularly in early Buddhism, did not refer to complex, strong, encompassing emotion. Feeling is a more incremental term and refers to the slightest bit of black-and-white judgment that we apply to every bit of perception. On a largely subliminal level, we approach and avoid small stimuli, intensifying what we find pleasing and backing off of or ignoring what we find unlikeable. These small experiences build up into huge conglomerates of reactivity and reinforce themselves as we go, picking and choosing and selecting more of what we found good in the first place.

If we notice the small feelings before they build up, we see how they can be very context-bound and arbitrary. We don't promote them into rigid truths and lock up frameworks of emotion. It is actually staggering to dip into this almost microscopic scale of judgmental behavior and realize how pervasive it is in the undercurrent of perception.

This exercise will explore small feeling evaluations of perceptions. You will list perceptual details you find pleasing in one column and unpleasing in another. You might recall the song, "My Favorite Things," from the 1965 movie *The Sound of Music*. The words to that song almost do the same thing. Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens are old-fashioned, pleasant, perceptual details. Of course, if you are outside on a hot summer day, warm woolen mittens might need to be recategorized. Context is vital. The refrain lists aversive images—the dog biting and the bee stinging. Those images are unambiguously negative.

This exercise is in two parts. For the first part, take a few deep breaths and then just start categorizing present observations of details, with positive ones in column one and negative ones in column three. Examine the smallest perceptions you can. In Buddhism, and in brain processing, a perception isn't as big as seeing a whole flower; it is composed of seeing a curve on the edge of a petal, a shade of a color, a shadow of contrast. In short phrases or single words, note both internal and external stimuli. This exercise is similar to the Distraction Net exercise (Section 1, Exercise 3), except for the binary plus and minus distinctions. You might catch body sensations, visual cues, sounds, or internal thoughts. Maybe you'll like the edge of a cat's paw, then dislike a muscle twinge in your neck, like the warmth of a sweater, dislike the towel hanging on a hook. Just notice what arises for a few minutes and jot your observations in the positive and negative columns.

+	**Associate!**	–	**Associate!**

After you've got a good list going of positively and negatively tinged details, it's time to take on the second part of this exercise, the Associate! columns. In these columns, write one-word associations to the perceptions in the plus and minus columns. For instance, a positive perception could be *shape of bush* with the association *globe* and another could be *white sky* with the association *calm.* A negative perception might be *brown of leaf* with the association word *loss*. Some of these will be more obvious and explanatory, while some of your associations may be more obtuse. Just try to quickly associate to your perceptions and jot words down.

After you've finished these association columns, take a break and then take a look at them. There are two things you might notice that will hopefully illuminate your subtle, feeling-evaluation process. One is that some associations that lead to feelings are simply arbitrary. The brown of the leaf that suggests loss and negative feelings could make another person think of mulch and new life. White sky could have shown up on either column, because it is calm for some people, but may indicate bad weather approaching for others. And by the way, is it bad for picnic plans and maybe good for the plants? We notice bits of things and associate from our reservoir of experience, and sometimes this makes sense and sometimes it just reinforces randomness.

You might also notice some themes in your columns and that will shed a different light on your process. Are you preoccupied with any of the *eight worldly concerns* of Buddhism: Pleasure and Pain, Fame and Insignificance, Praise and Blame, Gain and Loss? In some texts, these are called the *eight worldly winds,* aptly conveying the fickleness of these states. Do emotional patterns recur?

The themes you notice in your association columns might be valuable as writing prompts in themselves. You could write the theme on the top of a page and associate to that; that would take your level of understanding of your personal constructions that lead to feelings even further.

By doing this analysis and subanalysis, you are likely to notice more quickly when you evaluate as you move through your world, and the evaluations will drop off like fish scales. The world's own colors show through more brightly when they are not coated with a film of unnecessary judgment.

Section 2, Exercise 8—Write from Inside the Object

The most basic division of reality for most people can be called subject and object, or inside and outside the self. We feel like the subjects of our verbs and experiences—I do, I sit, I write—and the objects out there are the recipients of our interest and purposes. Our first interactions, our training, our perspective, and our society reinforce the primacy and necessity of this split. It is functionally important, but it is also clearly overemphasized. What defines me becomes mine and my people and my stance and my world and locks up. This exercise plays with switching perspective on this basic duality.

Find a pleasing or soothing object that you can hold in one hand. You might take a walk and look for a simple natural object like a leaf or a rock. You might have something on a shelf or in a drawer nearby. Hold the object for a bit and then put it down where you and can look at it. Think about how you see that object, how it feels to you, and what about it pleases you.

Take a few breaths as you shift gears, and then consider what it feels like to be this object, to exist as it does, to be communicating in some way as even an inanimate object might. This will take some active imagining, so give it a few minutes of concentration. Then try and write loosely for a while from the viewpoint of the object looking back to you. How might that object experience being in your world? If you want a little structure, you can try writing what the object would say to you if it communicated to you, verbally, emotionally, or telepathically. Just make an effort to do what we very rarely do: look from the object's view.

By spelling out this vague concept, the existence of your object, in writing, you develop a capacity to change places and switch lenses on your consciousness. This is a vital and underutilized skill that keeps experience and the world lively. It also serves as a reminder that a perspective starts from any vantage point, and appreciating that fact softens many sharp edges.

Section 2, Exercise 9—Asking about Causes and Conditions Instead of "Why?"

As the self-concept fades in prominence and the world becomes less egocentric, the questions we ask about what is happening change. They become more useful. If we ask why something is happening just from the stance of our selves, we look for linear reasons that point back to us and sometimes start seeing many more forces pointing to us than there may be. Most forces are more like invisible rivers in which we are swimming, flowing beside us and crossing currents through us and around us. We aren't always in a whirlpool.

If we look more neutrally at various forces, we see more clearly what can be arranged or managed to make useful adjustments. We get less caught up in delineating blame and more involved in productive change. This kind of viewpoint has a fluidity and complexity that reflects reality much better than a linear causation model.

This exercise is a systematic, almost mathematical, way of asking "What is happening with what?" instead of "Why?" Think through an important emotional paradigm in your life, a recurrent pattern of reacting that you notice and might wish to change. At the top of the following chart, fill in the blanks to briefly define this pattern, or write your own title.

Then think through the variance of forces affecting the pattern. Think on as many scales and dimensions as you can, including physical realities of your body and temperament, immediate situations, historical patterns of your own life, and bigger cultural and cosmic conditions of your existence. When you think you're done, look for just one more possibility. List your items first, and then think through the relative weights of each and give them percentages so that your causes and conditions add up to roughly 100 percent. Throw in a miscellaneous category if that helps.

Causes and Conditions Analysis

Factors in My Feeling ________________When ________________

or ________________.

1. ________________.	________________%
2. ________________.	________________%
3. ________________.	________________%
4. ________________.	________________%
5. ________________.	________________%
6. ________________.	________________%
7. ________________.	________________%
8. ________________.	________________%
9. ________________.	________________%
10. ________________.	________________%
11. ________________.	________________%
12. ________________.	________________%
	100%

This list usually requires some hard searching for background influences and some juggling of the numbers. Playing with it and working with it help us see from outside of a situation within which we are often trapped. That move alone is a powerful force of liberation. Next time something seems overwhelming, unclear, or unfairly directed toward you, think in these broader terms. Look at a variety of interacting forces instead of looking for reasons. This gives you mobility instead of attribution. You don't always need this chart's degree of precision to usefully widen the aperture of observation.

Section 2, Exercise 10—A Word from the Resistance

In this section, we've encountered many possibilities for diminishing grasping to the concept of a fixed self, which is a huge accomplishment in Buddhist terms, and also almost always leads to some relief of internal pressure. Exercises revealed how we put ourselves together concretely, conceptually, emotionally, and mistakenly. We've deconstructed our selves, and yet each of us still works from some intact sense of being a person, even a person exploring the problems of being a person. We all do need a sense of a self, but meditative and mindfulness practices and Buddhism help that need stay fluid and based on usefulness in moment-to-moment reality.

This all sounds good, but we have one more major consideration. We all resist this awareness more than we might realize. Letting go of self-concepts is terrifying and sad. It can feel very disorienting. We spend tremendous energy building and maintaining these things and they have a certain force of their own. We embrace our freedom and flee from it in each moment.

A beautiful quote about this was written by the Buddhist teacher Sojun Diane Martin Roshi:

> I also acknowledge a strange kind of grief in the realization that sometimes I feel the desire for desire. I have to let go of this wanting, and try to be present, see what's really going on, and stay with that, because that is, in fact, real, authentic and bottomlessly deep. Whether I like it or not.[1]

For this exercise, all you have to do is react quickly to the quote on the top of the next page and write for at least ten minutes. Don't turn the page until you are ready to write. Write like a free write, responding immediately and without trying to be positive, mature, or correct. Be sure to include how the statement hits you physically. Let your feelings flow. Now turn the page.

"I am NOT a singular, enduring entity."

It is good to have some time to just have a written tantrum about this fact. We don't like it and it's especially difficult in a culture that emphasizes materialism and personal power. We will rebel against events that force the realizations of our interconnectedness with all beings and our impermanence. This, too, is a natural force that we need to recognize more than eradicate. This writing will help release at least some of the blind and driven power of the resistance.

Section 3
Words to Go Beyond Words

EVERY word is a carrier of a tiny bit of meaning, but human language is how all of those bits are assembled, arranged, and put in the context of many other sensory experiences, from body gesture to voice tone. All beings seem to have some form of language, some means of creating patterned events that convey information to other beings. Even single-celled organisms have been found to communicate using photons or specific light waves. As stated in an article on that topic, “Information transfer is a life principle.”[1]

If we watch branches blowing in the wind or listen to birds singing, we perceive external arrangement, and that is because it is turning into some kind of internal arrangement, some reflective aligning of chemicals or cellular motions, that we translate first into raw perception. The waves out there make some waves in the organism, and then we weigh these waves against other experiences and patterns we know. Eventually, for humans, this process gets coded into a word, and we have now named the wind or the beautiful trill in the throat of a bird.

Humans easily forget the primal nature of language and get caught in the very tail end of the process, the words. Words can become patterned themselves and become agents of events that are dismembered from the original intent to communicate. Consensual meaning, even in the sense of a plain definition of a word, can drift away. Communication as a simple transfer of an imprint from one being to another gets lost in patterns of word play, competition, and avoidance.

Words cannot re-create experiences, especially profound organic experiences, but they can point others in the direction of understanding them when used with care. This kind of care is evident in most Buddhist writing and word usage. That may be why Buddhist study has a livening effect almost regardless of the content.

To get back to the purity of language as transmission, in this section, we will refresh usage of the word. We will arrange words in novels ways, lay them out in new patterns, and approach them from different angles. In this section, there is some more room for play.

It is human that so much of our communication ends up needing words. Buddhism stresses the limits of words, and there have been anti-language movements within the religion. But there is also the deep appreciation of the wiring that makes words necessary, the organic quality of language as a structure, and the particulars of our minds that move within the universal.

We cannot communicate the universal directly, but we don't neglect trying to share what we know with each other. A book by a seminal Zen writer in America, Dainin Katagiri, is entitled *You Have to Say Something.* A classical Buddhist poem from the Chinese Song dynasty called *The Song of the Jewel Mirror Samadhi*, by Tozan Ryokai, makes a similar point in describing *thusness*, or the quality of being that basically cannot be described. "Although it is not fabricated it is not without speech.… Subtly included within the true, inquiry and response come up together."[2] We might not be able to answer the verbal question of what is real, exactly, but every time we ask, we learn something.

Words, too, are within what is real, and they are our main medium for creating events in others. We may never be sure what the event we created is, but our adeptness with words relates to our willingness to set them afloat in the tides of the present moment.

Section 3, Exercise 1—Refresh Sensory Usage with Synesthesia

Buddhism takes sensory experience very seriously. Our senses are how we stay connected to the flow of the present moment. Our senses, as much as our minds, are what make us able to be conscious. Early Buddhists considered the mind to be simply a sixth sense, another filter for meeting the world and life.

Our sensory experience tends to dull over time. Part of this is due to the mechanical wear and tear of aging, but part of it is due to desensitization from repetition. There is the repetition of familiar aspects of our environment and also habitual patterns of selecting and noting what we do sense. Desensitization can be reversed. We can refresh sensory experience.

Synesthesia is one way to do that. Technically, it refers to a sense stimulus spontaneously evoking a sense impression from another sense, like hearing a deep chord of music and seeing a splash of purple. Synesthesia is seen as a symptom in some contexts and as an artistic capacity in others. In a broader way, it can be defined as mixing sensory modalities, and it can be cultivated.

This exercise is meant to cultivate strange mixtures of sense and thought impressions. Take a deep breath and loosely answer the following questions without too much deliberation.

What color is …

the sound of cicadas? ________________

the smell of paper? ________________

the feel of drizzle? ________________

the thought of a multiplication problem? ________________

the feeling of contentment? ________________

Now here are some other sensory mix-ups to consider:

What does magenta sound like? _________________

What does jealousy smell like? _________________

What is the taste of the truth? _________________

What texture feels like the smell of an onion? ________________

How many thoughts weigh an ounce? ________________

What emotion feels most wet? ________________

Try to write and answer a few more synesthesia questions. Draw on odd sensory experiences you have or randomly consider experiences from different senses.

Now that you’ve shaken up your senses and maybe puréed them, too, take a deep breath and look around where you are. Does your environment feel different than it usually does? Can you see it through less-habituated eyes or use unaccustomed modes to perceive yourself in your world?

Section 3, Exercise 2—Everything Relates

Buddhist philosophy and experience emphasize the interdependence of all things. Causes and conditions combine to bring about our actual lives and the events of our lives. If you start asking when something really begins, as Section 2, Exercise 9, illustrated, you may end up in a vast universe. If you ask where the edge of influence is, you may similarly find that one thing, person, or event bleeds into the next in a rippling flow of circumstances. This exercise plays with the poetry that evolves when interpenetration is assumed, when random pieces find their inevitable linkages.

This exercise has elements of a game, so just take each step one at a time and it will come together in the end. First, take a deep breath and write down the first word or short phase that comes to your mind:

Next, look around you and write down the first word or short phrase that you see written (besides this book), like on a book binding, a sign, or a truck passing by:

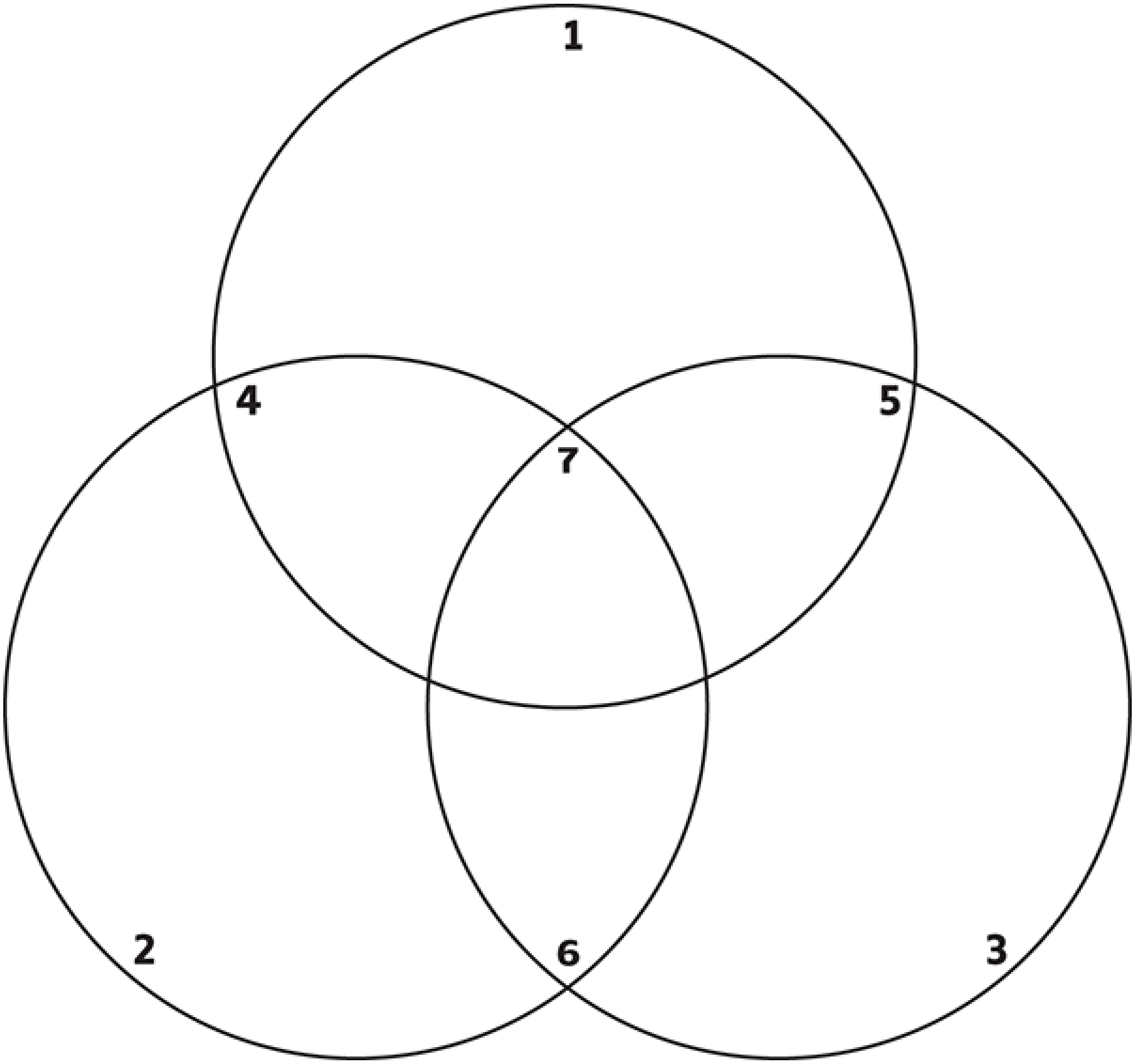
Then, turn on a TV, radio, podcast, computer video, or other electronic medium with speech, and write down the first word you hear spoken:

Write the three words or short phrases in the outer shapes of the pretzel diagram, where the numbers 1 through 3 are. You will need to flip between these instructions and the diagram for a bit.

Now look at the shapes where the outer circles overlap (not including the center). Look at two of the words or phrases that are on the circle and think of one element, detail, or possibility that they have in common. For instance, say you thought of *tree* and heard the word *government* when you flipped on the television. Those words would be on the outside of the circles and, in the space between those two circles, you might write *paper* or *long-lived*, associations that might fit both. Any two things have an edge where they touch and something exists that relates to them both, so

find those elements for the three overlapping shapes and write them where you see the numbers 4 through 6.

Finally, for the center of the pretzel, where you see the number 7, read your three overlap words or phrases in areas 4, 5, and 6 and stretch to find something that all three have in common. To continue the example, if you end up with *paper*, *noisy,* and *bright colors*, maybe you could write *piñata* in the center, or *performance*, or *overloaded*. Vary the types of words you use and let your associations be loose.



For the finale of this exercise, write your words or phrases in a list headed by the word or phase in the center as a title. You can follow the numbers in your list or be random. Your list might be suggestive of a

poem as it stands. Very often, these “Everything Relates” lists themselves have a strange lyrical sensibility because of the meeting of the random and interconnected forces. Sometimes the poetry takes a little fleshing out, and you might take the list as either a series of line openers, prompts, or words to work into lines of poetry. Fill out your aftermath of the pretzel ring in any way that inspires you.

This exercise plays with many interpenetrating elements, like Section 1, Exercise 9, where different brain hemispheres combine, with structural, linguistic, and logical elements intertwining. The resulting poem may be a little surreal, but just stretching for connections opens the mind to neglected potential linkages. The weaving multiplicity of reality underscores so much of what we feel as beautiful and mysterious.

Section 3, Exercise 3—Describing What Is Not

The *Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra* is a primary sutra, chant, and teaching in Mahāyāna Buddhism. It juxtaposes form and emptiness without opposing them: ". . . form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form; that which is form is emptiness, that which is emptiness, form." This is completely confusing on the surface. The sutra goes on to list all the no-things that are in emptiness. "Therefore in emptiness, no-form, no-feelings, no-perceptions.…"[1] This piles on more confusion. The sutra is absorbed below language and logic, as many are.

The same kind of confusion is expressed in the short story collection called *After the Quake* by Haruki Murakami. This dialogue appears in one story:

> "I am, indeed, pure Frog, but at the same time I am a thing that stands for a world of un-Frog."
>
> "Hmm, I don't get that at all."[2]

This emptiness is not something with definite contours or characteristics, but it is an essentially Buddhist type of dilemma that brings illumination through exploration. Frequently people refer to a teacup in discussions of the paradox of emptiness, because it is an object whose form is a support of emptiness. The empty space created by the cup's form is why it works. Emptiness is not nothingness; it is the space of potentiality and the existence of the not quality. Emptiness in Buddhism does not mean something isn't real but that it exists dependent on myriad realities that cannot be pulled apart.

We are used to affirmative language telling us what something is. In this exercise we are going to try to use language that tells us what something is not. This is a way of entering emptiness through a linguistic door. Think of something like the Frog in the preceding quote to describe in an un-way. This could be a view out your window, a person you know, an object, or even a song or food item. Just start writing about the "not" of the thing you have chosen. "Out my window it is not daytime. It is not quiet. There

is not a barn or a giraffe across the road," for example. Just keep writing, be as frivolous and imaginative as you can, and simply avoid statements of what is.

________________ is NOT …

It is *not* easy to do this. We don't look at negative space very much or examine the inversions of what is easy to notice. But all of that is context and is equally real as what stands out. This is an important way the Buddhist view fills in the world and makes it feel richer, denser, and more packed with dynamic motion.

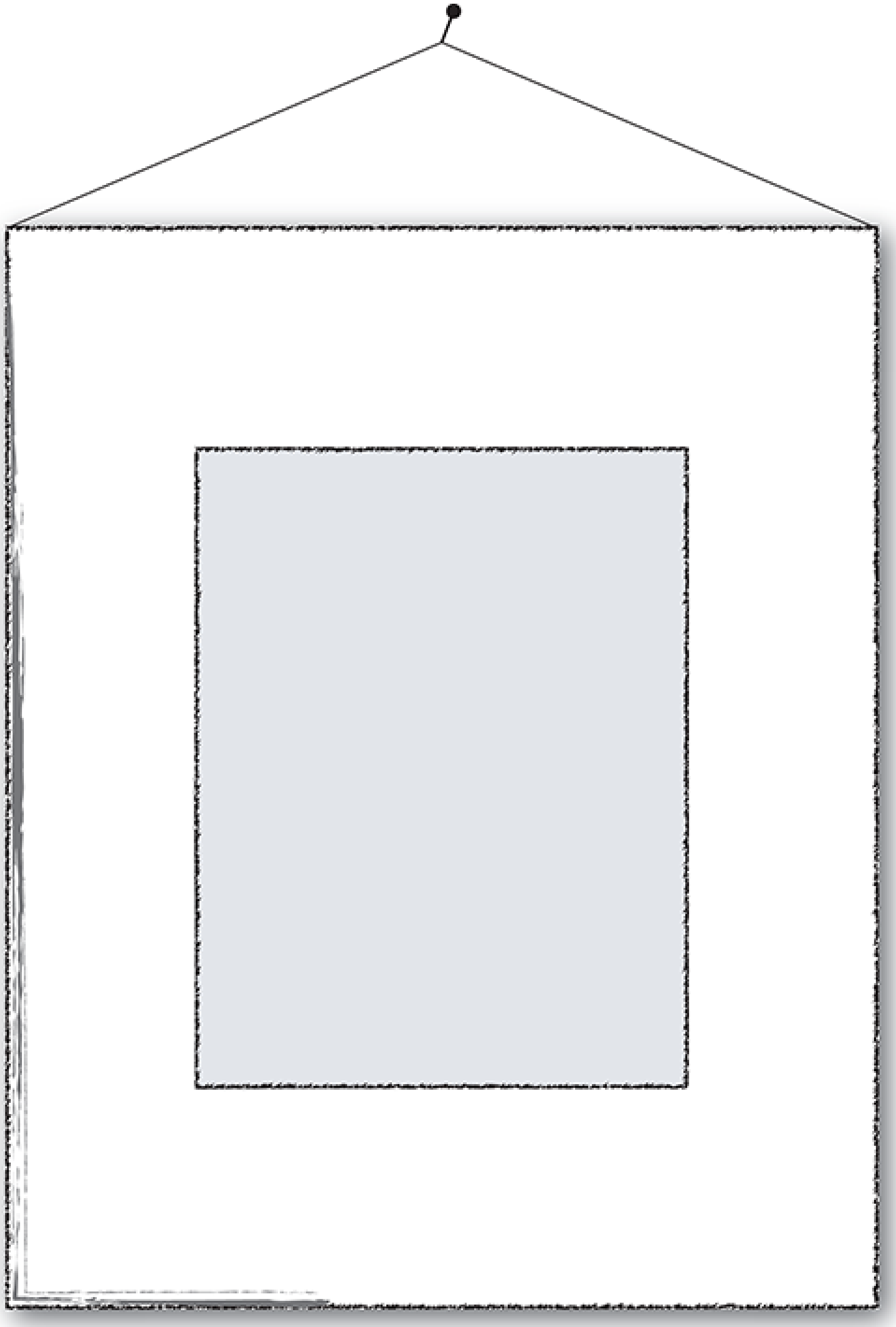
Section 3, Exercise 4—Form and Emptiness

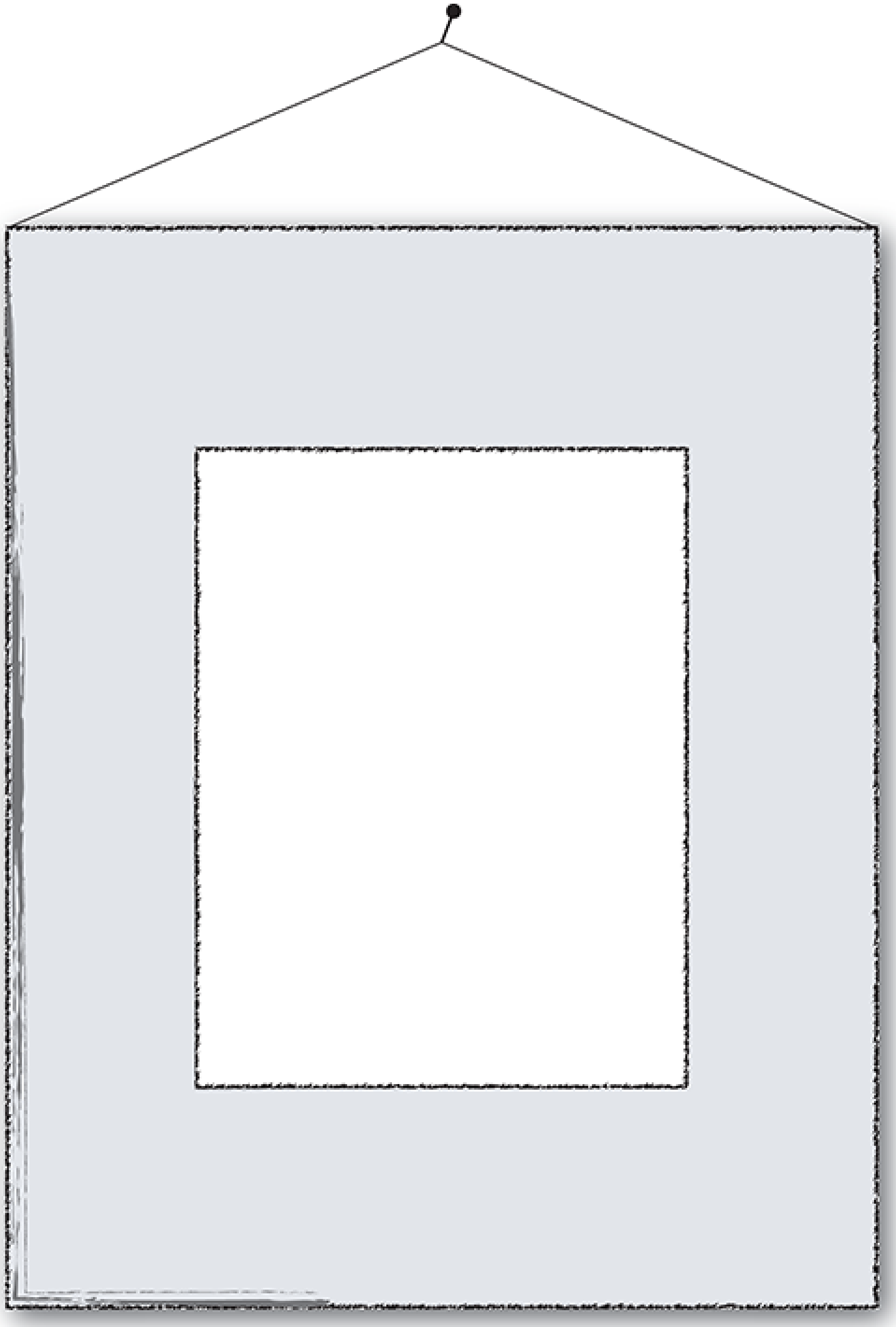
To continue where Exercise 3 left off, we will do another exercise that plays with negative space. Many writings and teachings in Buddhism take up the topic of emptiness and the dialectic of emptiness and form. This represents an essential thread in the weave of Buddhist poetry and outlook. One of the most beautiful and useful poems in Buddhist teaching is called *Sandokai*, written by an eighth-century Zen monk, Sekito Kisen. The title, *Sandokai*, is translated as *The Harmony of Difference and Equality*, and some of the poem's lines allow us to feel an interpenetrating duality that exists without any clashing: "The spiritual source shines clear in the light;/ the branching streams flow on in the dark."[1]

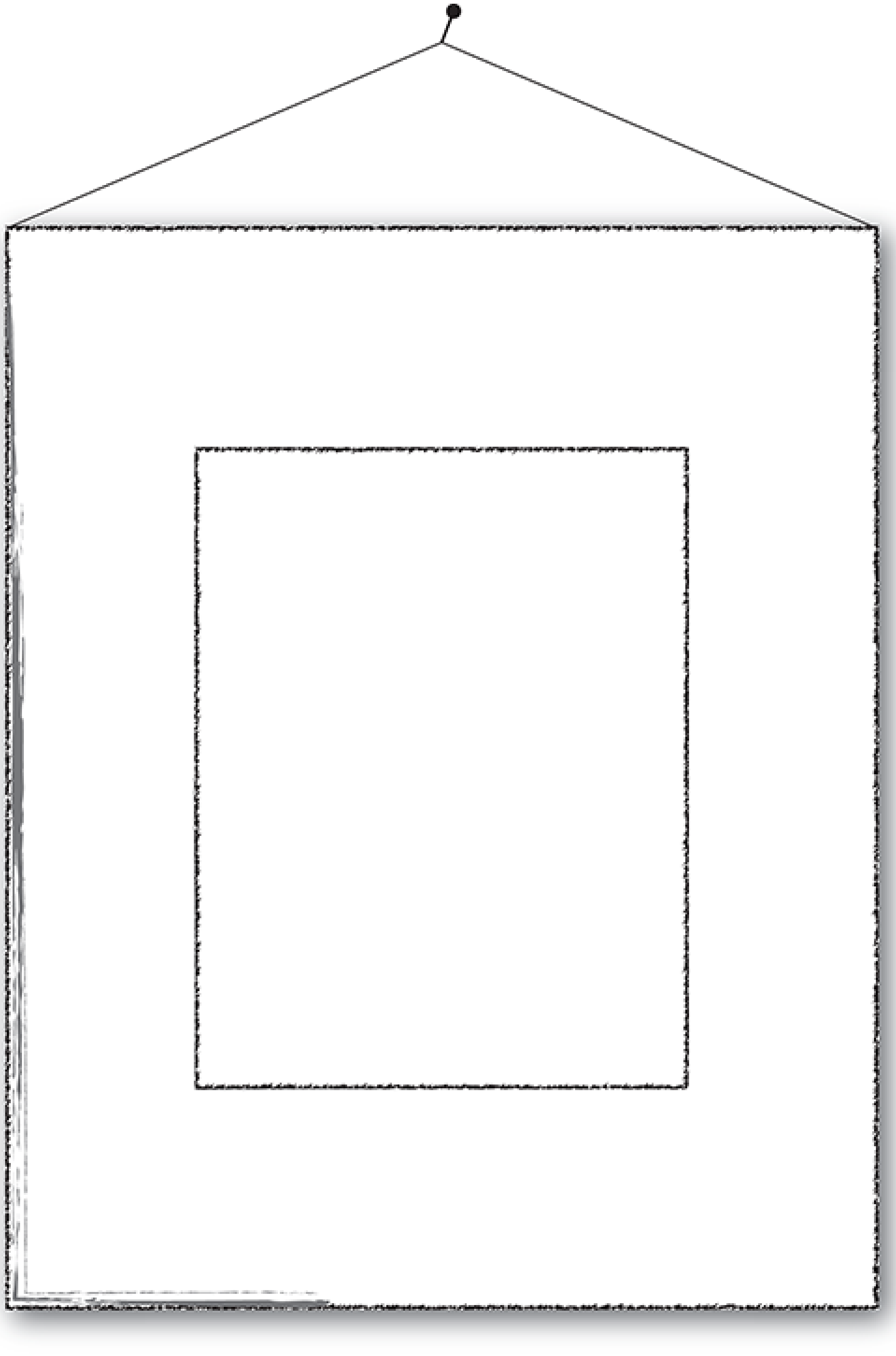
The essence of working with interpenetrating and dynamic forces is the ability to shift between views and states. This exercise mixes an image and words to shuffle up what is figure and ground in your writing. It will allow you to feel the pivot of form and emptiness in a symbolic way.

Each of the next three pages conveys an image of a large empty frame. On the first page, you will write inside the frame, as if your words were the painted canvas or picture in a frame. On the second page, you will write on the frame shape itself, leaving the background and center empty. You might want to turn the page as you write on each side or you might just carry lines across the vertical parts of the frame. On the third page you can write on what would be the wall the whole thing is hanging on, or the background. Or, for an alternative, on the third page, you might just pick random aspects of the design and write on whatever pieces suit your creation.

These three pieces will be short, since you don't have much space, so you can pick a topic that is small, but continue the topic through each piece. If nothing comes to mind, it works well to write something about your present state of being. You can use the three pages to describe how you feel right now or something that is critical in your current thinking, practice, or development.







What suited your work best in this moment, form or emptiness, figure or foreground, foreground or background? For that matter, which image represented which? It’s good to have a sense of what is foreground and

what is background, but it’s probably even more useful to be versatile in both, fluent in language that moves through both form and emptiness.

Section 3, Exercise 5—Impossible Questions

One of the most important parts of a journaling practice is asking questions. In journal entries, the writing of questions usually precedes the breakthrough to new ground. When we write a question to ourselves, it is never rhetorical; we are really expressing the edge of awareness. Being on that edge and facing the blankness beyond automatically move us.

A classic book on Zen Buddhist practice pivots on this realization and is entitled *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. In this book, Shunryu Suzuki beautifully describes the power of the mind that has no assumptions or preconceptions. “If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few.”[1]

Another Zen Buddhist and activist, Bernie Glassman, makes a similar point. “As soon as we know something, we prevent something else from happening. When we live in a state of knowing, rather than unknowing, we're living in a fixed state of being where we can't experience the endless unfolding of life, one thing after another. Things happen anyway—nothing ever remains the same—but our notions of what *should* happen block us from seeing what actually *does* happen.”[2] The less we add to reality and the less we evaluate through expectations, the closer we are to our ongoing experience.

Real questions are the medium of the open, beginner's mind. Real questions feel impossible; the answer is nowhere we have been and can feel irresolvable. The best questions take some bravery. For this exercise, dig up some of these questions that are within you. Where are you stuck, unsure, or blocked? Walk right up to the wall and wonder about it. Write as many of your own sincere questions as you can.

??

When you can't think of another question, just take a minute and see if one other little possibility bubbles up. Then take a few deep breaths, or a

walk, or meditate for a bit. Reread your list. Write a short paragraph about what your list reveals to you; not answers, but what the wondering tells you, what the questions reveal about the asker or where the asker is.

Section 3, Exercise 6—What Is Indescribable?

We continue with this section of paradox, negative space, and dialectic with a question. The question, “What is indescribable?” is not asking for a definition, but parameters. Here we are going to walk to the edge of a somewhat different cliff and look over. The question is asking about the experience that occurs when words have failed you. What feelings do you have that make you aware of the limits of your ability to articulate and convey what has happened in a way that either preserves the awareness or shares it accurately with another person?

We will start again with culling through experience for a list. Think of times when you thought about or could have thought about how you cannot possibly describe what is happening to you. These might be experiences in meditation, either transcendent or miserable. These might be experiences in the sensory or emotional world. These experiences might feel cosmic, synchronistic, or spiritual. Just note the experience, such as “day of very quick sitting,” “sight of sunset in Michigan,” or “grief over Mark’s death.”

Very often, when you approach a visual cliff, you see that it actually isn’t a cliff but just a dip leading to another landing. So, we are going to take one more step. Pick an item on your list that you would like to approach and work with, and just write about how it was. You picked this list because it was beyond words, so don’t expect to nail or capture this. Just let your writing move: work around it, write about what you do know

about the experience, the edge of what words can say, or just why it is so indescribable.

Things I can say about my indescribable experience

You may surprise yourself when you look at this piece of writing. Very often, approaching what feels impossible yields something fresh. It may not be exactly the assignment or the description you wanted, but maybe a new realization emerged about the depth and source of the experience you had. Reread this piece tomorrow. Probably, with a little distance, you will find a gem where you stepped off of the cliff.

Section 3, Exercise 7—Language Deconstruction Game

If you just did Exercise 6, you need a break from the struggles on the edges of language usage. This exercise really is a kind of game that plays with language. It is based on the *N+7 procedure*, which was invented by Jean Lescure of Oulipo (Oulipo is short for *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, or *Work of Potential Literature*). To start with, randomly list about twenty-five nouns in this box:

Now, either meditate for a few minutes or take several deep, cleansing breaths, and then write a short piece about your experience or self in this moment. If you have any other topic in mind, feel free to use it.

In the N+7 procedure, you replace each noun in a text with the seventh one following it in a dictionary. There are online computer programs that will do this for you if you want to play with the original, but here, you can

work with your pool of replacements in the box. Since your piece is short, replace each noun with a noun you randomly grab from your box.

Reread your piece. Your new text will have some of the same feel as the original plus some wackiness you wouldn't expect. It is fun to do this and it is a useful reminder of the difference between content and process. In Buddhist teachings, we learn about process *under* content, how some forces work through more media than we can imagine. Gravity pulls on rocks and air. Fading happens to thoughts and colors. Both mental and material events arise and disperse. In our everyday life, we often see how the players change but the game remains the same.

Section 3, Exercise 8—Verbify

Buddhist writing often uses verbs in inventive manners. Eihei Dogen, a great Zen master, notably turned nouns into verbs and then turned verbs upside down. The *Abhidharma* is a huge explanation of early Buddhism's view of interacting forces, and it didn't use one personal pronoun but simply listed dynamic events. In general, Buddhist thinking emphasizes action and the meeting of forces more than personal narrative. A focus on impermanence doesn't mix with the veneration of objects; it suggests motion.

For any writer, an emphasis on using verbs enlivens both the process and the product. In this exercise, we will focus on a verb-heavy journal entry.

First, make a list of verbs that are happening to you right now. Try to dig up more than a few, and try to really push the list to find more than the commonplace ones. To start with, it is likely that you are sitting, breathing, and thinking. But you might find that as you sit, you also roil and churn, or smile and soar.

Live Verbs in This Moment

Now, take a few deep breaths and maybe sit for a few minutes to observe how you are doing internally. Then write for a while about the motion you notice in your current moment. Rely on your verb list and

invent or throw in a few more. Think about and describe your current state as a work in progress, which it always is, and use as many verbs as possible.

The task you have just accomplished is another paradox of expression. You can’t describe this moment in motion because it is in motion and there is no moment, only the motion. But the effort to focus on the motion and use the power of the verb helps reorient you to live reality. Your best stance is not a stance but adaptation and action.

Section 3, Exercise 9—Word Mandala

Mandalas actually were first used in the Hindu religion, but they are most commonly associated with Tibetan religious rituals, or simply with circular religious art forms. In some Tibetan monasteries, incredible, elaborate mandalas of brightly colored sand are still constructed by groups of monks on large, low tables, with images of deities, often surrounded by four portals. The sand is poured through cones to make precise lines and patterns. These beautiful mandalas are objects of reverence, meditation, and healing and are swept away at the end of their creation, recalling the truth and experience of impermanence.

Mandalas can take many forms, from paintings of deities to pages in coloring books. Their circular containment holds imagery differently than the rectangles or squares we are used to. The eye doesn’t exactly know where to start scanning the object and the mind doesn’t construct its message so quickly. In that gap in cohesion, creativity and new perspectives can arise.

The idea of a word mandala comes from the Buddhist teacher Sojun Diane Martin of Udumbara Zen Sanghas. She frequently assigns this project to help with feelings of being overwhelmed or fragmented. It helps whenever ideas are bouncing around in the mind uncomfortably. Those ideas sometimes aren’t ready to make it to the world of narrative, or thought construction, or prose. But when they are thrown into a circle, their relationships can be multiple and fluid and they find their own harmony and containment in the infinite nature of the circle.

On the next page are a circle and a space for a title. Title your mandala with something that you are working on or something that is causing you some distress. Then just randomly write in the circle. You might write single words, or phrases and sentences might appear. Let size and orientation of your writing vary. If something occurs to you that is really outside of the parameters of your concept, put it outside of the circle. When you are done, take a few breaths and see if there are one or two more things to add. This is also a suggestion from Roshi Diane Martin.

She wisely reminds us that the important things sometimes try to hide and need a little extra nudge.

Hopefully, your word mandala was as illuminating and soothing as they can be. Mandalas help us remember how nonlinear life is. Everything has many parts and relationships to everything else. This exercise accesses a wisdom that is tolerant of chaos and yet helps put things together.

Section 3, Exercise 10—Automatic Free Write → Haiku

To close the experience in this section of the guided journal, we are going to combine some forms in an almost magical way. This is another exercise that can turn out poetry without a particular effort or focus on making a poem.

Start this exercise with a meditation of at least five minutes where you start with your breath and get as settled as you can. When you feel your mind quiet down a few notches, focus on the idea of your writing flowing. You might pick an image like a river and develop it visually in your mind, or you might just imagine the energy pouring out of you through your hands. Take a few minutes to reinforce that your words can pour out of you, unobstructed, unhindered, free.

Next, you are going to do a ten-minute free write. You might recall the instructions from Tristine Rainer's *The New Diary* that were in the first exercise in this book: "Write fast, write everything, include everything, write from your feelings, write from your body, accept whatever comes."[1] Take that to heart and let yourself push past ideas that might stop you and focus more on just physical writing than the particulars of what you write.

Now that you've finished your free write, take a few more deep and easy breaths. Then reread what you wrote. Try to look at it as if you have never seen it before, like you found it on a paper blowing across a street and just picked it up. Look on your own words with your most compassionate heart and profound mind.

You are now going to answer three questions. Answer each question in *five or fewer* words.

Questions:

1. What was the main point conveyed in your writing?
2. What was a sensory image contained or implied in your writing?
3. What was the main emotion portrayed in your writing?

Answers:

1. ________________
2. ________________
3. ________________

If you just look at the lines with your answers, they are very likely to be a Haiku-like gem of a short poem. They may be the seed of a longer poem or prose piece, or an apt summary of the state of your being in this moment.

In this section closer, as always, your words, carrying your intention and unique momentary presence, create more than just the line on the page. They open awareness and dilate the aperture of experience that is possible. Your writing comes from a broader awareness than the focus of your momentary, conscious attention. That is why the words that flow can bring forward a truth that surprises even the writer.

Section 4
A Sampler of Different Schools of Buddhism

THIS section of exercises reflects on gems of wisdom from different schools, times, and landscapes of the Buddhist religion. Any major world religion with a long history has a great variety of practice methods and insight vehicles. Buddhism’s wingspan is wide. But a major religion has a body and the essence of that body in Buddhism may shine through this variety of exercises. The exercises start with some general broad practices and filter through a roughly chronological and minimalistic sampling of powerful teachings that land in the present moment.

Buddhism’s iteration in twenty-first-century America is just taking shape. As described in the opening to Section 1, this is a recent and formative history. Buddhism is a therapeutic religion and the accent is clearly on the therapeutic part of that phrase in our general culture. The growing fascination is undeniable.

In an article, “American Nirvana,” Adam Gopnik describes how “Buddhism in America is simultaneously exotic and familiar …” and how Robert Wright’s new view of American Buddhism in the book *Why Buddhism Is True* “is not only self-consciously secularized but aggressively ‘scientized.’”[1] Gopnik seems a bit torn; he says that “ … a faith practice *without* an authoritarian structure sooner or later becomes a hobby,”[2] but he also values the fact that Buddhist practices reduce symptoms; they simply do help people.

It is not just the authority that is lost when Buddhism is purposefully secularized, but the base of all religions’ domain, the unknowable and infinite. Buddhism is about experiencing that base as directly as possible with the human equipment that we have, and about living with the ethical implications of that experience, also as directly as possible. The secularization of a religion incurs this loss of ineffable base, and the

exercises in this section are intended to touch upon reminders of this context of Buddhism.

The question of the value of secularized Buddhism remains. Even in a pragmatic and Western scientific mode, Buddhist practices do good work. People feel better and act better. Some people will enter the religion through the practices. The deepest view of the Buddhist religion is inexpressibly beautiful and it is the hallmark of the religion that it spans the religious and the therapeutic, the absolute and the relative, the infinite and the specific, with its methodology and creativity.

The Tibetan branch of Buddhism emphasizes the ideas of *antidotes*, healing through pointed cultivation of opposite energies or thoughts. In any guise at all, Buddhism provides an antidote to the dangerous and erupting ills of our current culture.

Section 4, Exercise 1—Insight and Calm

Vipassana and *Samatha* are two aspects of meditation that represent complementary processes of liberation. Vipassana is derived from two roots that mean seeing and into or in a special way, while Samatha means peacefully abiding. In summary, Vipassana practices are meant to cultivate insight, whereas Samatha practices bring about calmness.

In early Buddhism, very specific techniques and steps delineated these two aspects as two different practices with an ultimate shared goal of "extinction" of conditioned, or manufactured and obstructed, existence. In other terms, the endpoint was *nirvana*, or a ceasing of production of cycles of life and death. A broad application of this idea might suggest that meditation stops unnecessary proliferation of the mind on all scales, and that either process brings lived experience closer to the purity that the mind actually is.

Vipassana practice strives to experience the processes of life directly, to sit and watch the arising of states, sensing, feeling, and thinking. The meditator observes the transience of process directly. Samatha practice uses a particular focus, from the breath to an object or a mantra, and develops concentration to create a mental state of calm. Despite conceptual and historical differences, the two processes have been compared to two wings of a bird because of their interpenetration. The mind needs to be settled to understand and analyze experience. Observing the rise and fall of experience naturally slows down and settles the mind.

In this exercise, two writing experiences pull apart these aspects of meditative practice. You will need to find an important object near you. It could just be a pen on your desk, or a significant keepsake in the room where you are. It could be something functional, like a new phone, or completely decorative. Set this object before you where you can view it.

Part 1

Describe this object in sensory detail for five minutes. Don't venture past the completely concrete reality and start to speculate or evaluate; just

write about the look, feel, sound, or smell or taste if they are relevant, the gross qualities as well as the tiny details of its physical reality.

Part 2

Describe your object again for five minutes, this time writing about why it is important to you. What is it about its physical description, function, associations, or history that makes you relate to it and value it? What about you connects with this object?

This exercise provides a glimpse into the differences between approaching an object with a Samatha-like purpose, calmly observant and concentrated, and then with a Vipassana-type purpose, looking into deeper meaning and connection. In both cases, a certain depth of perception is acquired, but for different reasons. Classical Buddhist meditation trainings have specific and emblematic objects, but this exercise extracts what might feel different in two profound approaches of Buddhist practice. Which one was easier? How did they affect you differently? Take a minute and write about how the two writing experiences differed, in quality and impact.

Section 4, Exercise 2—Tonglen Meditation Setup

Tonglen meditation is a Tibetan structure for generating true compassion. It is based on a kind of reversal of typical emotional logic. In this meditation, the meditator breathes in what is painful and bad and breathes out what is helpful and relieving. The word *Tonglen* literally means “sending and taking” in Tibetan, but we are used to taking in help and avoiding what is bad. This practice has a surprising twist on our usual ways because the reversal loosens the boundaries of what is inside and out more than it distinctly changes the direction of flow.

There are many beautiful books about and descriptions of this meditation practice, and a short YouTube video by Pema Chödrön, one of its most well-known proponents, does a beautiful job of summarizing it.[1] She emphasizes some of the structural points of Tonglen meditation. It usually starts with some personal calming breaths that evoke awareness of the space and compassion that are available at all times. Then, the meditator focuses on something or someone specific to address in the meditation. Pema Chödrön emphasizes that the breathing in focuses on the longing to remove suffering and, as she says it, the meditator then can “relax out” and send enough space and help so that those who are suffering can live with their truths and situations. Compassion is not fixing things, but an avenue of sharing. The classical idea is to imagine that the air you breathe in is hot and heavy and that the air, and energy, you breathe out is cool and light.

Tonglen meditation usually proceeds in imagining wider and wider spheres of influence of compassion. Often it begins focused on one person whose suffering touches our lives. Instructions often also include addressing the natural resistance that can arise in our typical wish to fight off awareness of terrible feelings. To do this, we focus on our own arising discomfort and pain, and then on all the people who feel similar discomfort and pain and blockage. The meditation moves out in a stepwise manner; often to friends and the people in our family next, then on to

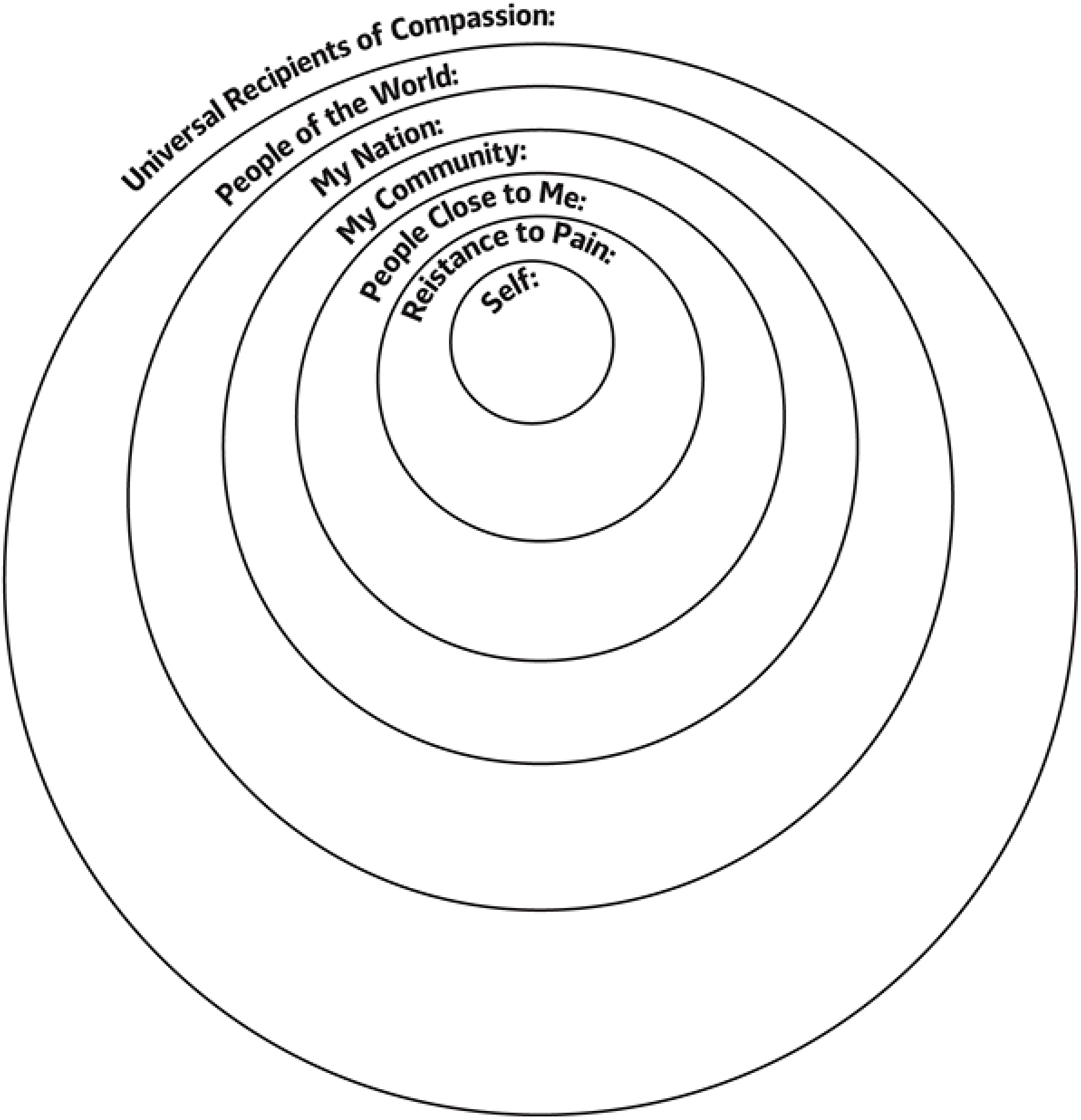
acquaintances, community, even to enemies we have, and then eventually to the broadest conception of beings that we can imagine.

Tonglen meditation might not be for everyone and Tara Brach wisely reminds us that we should be cautious and self-protective with the possibilities for feeling overwhelmed with this technique.[2] This writing exercise is not about actually doing the meditation, but setting up the categories for the meditation. If you feel comfortable or are already familiar with Tonglen meditation, you can see how the writing setup informs the meditation by following the exercise with the meditation.

You will fill out a diagram that helps you think through the broadening categories of suffering or suffering beings around you that can be used to define the stages of the formal meditation. Just doing that, with the wish to spread compassion, can be powerful in itself.

To do this exercise, just jot down words and phrases in each circle based on the label in the circle. You can work with specific names, groups of people, animals, or other natural phenomena. You can define arenas of emotions or specific types of problems, such as diseases or natural disasters. For example, for *self* you can just put your name or an aspect of yourself or your feelings that is notably problematic. *Acquaintances* could be people at your workplace, the coffee shop, on the bus, or all grocery cashiers. Outside of the circle you will write a description of the broadest, most universal idea of recipients of compassion you can imagine, encompassing all beings and all worlds.

As you write your ideas, simply think that the receptive paper or screen itself is compassion and that there is compassion everywhere. Every name or group or thing you write could be experiencing more compassion because of your work and placement of those words in visible space.


Universal Recipients of Compassion:
People of the World:
My Nation:
My Community:
People Close to Me:
Reistance to Pain:
Self:

Section 4, Exercise 3—The Flow of Consciousness Actions

Some of the earliest Buddhist written material was composed of lists and charts used by early monks to memorize the teachings of the Buddha. They laid out a system of analysis of all phenomena, including consciousness interacting with the universe of possibilities. These technical matrixes and commentaries are called the *Abhidharma*, and they expanded over centuries and across continents into a huge and dense body of Buddhist understanding.

It is hard to pick one idea out of the *Abhidharma* because its concepts interweave in multiple dimensions within infinite realities. The whole system is a staggering, inclusive, and ambitious compendium. For centuries, learned scholars and monks have worked on expanding and explaining this system.

There is one word from the original language of the *Abhidharma*, Pali, that captures a vital dimension of the vast study. That word is *citta* (pronounced like the animal cheetah). Citta was introduced as one of the skandhas, or reality construction materials, in Section 2, Exercise 3. Citta is the barest, smallest element of a consciousness action, the raw sense of consciousness meeting an object within a field. It is the atomic-level building block of all consciousness events, from a glance to reading and comprehending and acting upon these words. But citta itself is before any processing at all occurs; it is consciousness touching on the world like light touching on a leaf, and once that light has landed, all manner of chemical, sensual, and functional events can begin to occur.

The study of citta in itself is a complex world. Cittas perform fourteen essential functions and are categorized in either eighty-nine or one hundred and twenty-one different ways. They are imbedded in from seven to fifty-two mental factors, which make the raw citta into the carrier of feeling, perception, intention, and even karmic activity. All of this is spelled out in detailed charts in the *Abhidharma*, accounting for every possibility of the development of consciousness.

Thought itself is a huge conglomeration of citta activity.[1] The tiniest bit of sensory perception we can imagine is made up of a set series of seventeen moments of cittas.[2] If we look at a neuropsychological comparison, the time frame of a citta might be about one-sixtieth of a second.[3] Cittas are mysterious but vital to a technical understanding of how original Buddhism understood the mind and its relationship to meditation practices. "Although we cannot know *citta* directly, it is where all Dhamma practice occurs."[4]

Cittas are the base of all cognition, but we experience them as a sense of continuity of our own consciousness. Our consciousness touches on one object at a time at such a rapid pace that we experience perception and cognition smoothly, like animation. The early Buddhists were such adept meditators that they could perceive each frame. They were almost watching cognition in slow motion and they realized complex aspects of our mental process that have been verified by neurological imaging in the twenty-first century.[5]

We cannot know the experience of citta directly, but the more we understand citta, the more we have a feel for consciousness as a process, and the more dispassion and acceptance we can have for ourselves as conscious beings. We are aware within a flowing law of nature, just like we move in planetary orbits, or like our food moves through our bodies in molecular exchange processes. We don't judge those processes so much, and we study and adjust them or to them with relative equanimity.

We are going to do an exercise to try and get a feel for the flow of citta, if not for the actual momentary citta action itself. At a teaching retreat, Bhikkhu Bodhi, a translator, commentator, and world scholar on *Abhidharma*, suggested two ways to describe the experience of citta. One way is similar to the exercise called Distraction Net (Section 1, Exercise 3), where you wait for something to arise in consciousness, like a cat sitting by a mouse hole. Then you can feel the background that gets interrupted when thought or perception starts.

Another way is to try and experience the truly "background light of awareness of all contents."[6] In this exercise, we will work with this second way. This exercise expands on the skandha description you might have written in Section 2, Exercise 3. It is not exactly possible to get behind

consciousness to describe consciousness' actions because we are in it, but the question to ponder is this: What is true of the flow of awareness despite any content? Try to write a poem or prose piece on the raw experience of your own citta, what it feels like to be awake, before you name a single thing.

The Flow of Citta

This may be the hardest exercise in the book. It requires letting the mind move beyond its own borders. To whatever degree you can describe the flow of citta, you actually expand those borders. You allow a kind of awareness that is neither inside nor outside, that is inspired by the law of nature that is your own alive mind. To touch on that is a gift.

Section 4, Exercise 4—Thought Control Methods from the Early Sutras

The early sutras of Buddhism contain stories, parables, and dialogue. This area of early doctrine is one of the three "baskets" of original Buddhist texts, besides the structural *Abhidharma* and the monastically-oriented *Vinaya*. The sutras contain what many scholars believe to be the most direct portrayal of the historical Buddha's teaching. They are incredibly interesting for that reason and they reveal the fact that the Buddha was an eclectic teacher and also an eclectic therapist of the deepest problems of all beings. It is said that Buddha taught people according to their needs and levels of awareness, and there are many examples of different techniques for the healing of suffering.

One sutra reveals an eclecticism in itself by listing five methods of thought control. The five methods read like five styles of Western psychotherapeutic techniques. This sutra, number 20, *Vitakkasanthana Sutta (The Removal of Distracting Thoughts),* lends itself well to expansion with writing exercises.[1]

The sutra starts with this problem: you're paying attention to something and it brings up bad thoughts, "unwholesome thoughts connected with desire, with hate and with delusion."[2] This illustrates the early Buddhist method of understanding experience. Things aren't bad in themselves, but they can bring up bad processes within us, processes that link us to the roots of our problems—greed, hatred, and delusion or ignorance. So you have this bad process arising and the sutra describes five sequential ways to get back on track and in focus, to return to a mind that is "steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness, and concentrated."[3] In this list, you try the first method and if it doesn't work, you go on to the second, continuing to five if one through four fail.

> **Method 1:** Switch your attention to something positive and wholesome. This is like counteracting a negative cognitive pattern with a positive affirmation, in more contemporary psychotherapeutic terms.

Method 2: Think directly about how dangerous and harmful your negative thoughts are. Realize how they affect your mind. This step is like examining the impact of negative schema.

Method 3: If these problem thoughts persist, try to forget them and don't give them attention. This isn't so easy but recognizes that attention feeds negative rumination. In this step, you try to drop the thought.

Method 4: Bring subtler reasoning processes to bear on your negative thought. Really look at the formation of it and the causes and conditions that brought it forward. This is a deeper analytic technique.

Method 5: If all else fails, get tough. Method 5 is to crush the thought and this is compared to a big person beating down a smaller one. The Buddha advises, "with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, he should beat down, constrain, and crush mind with mind."[4]

With a mind calmed by these methods, the sutra goes on to say that this person "is then called master of the courses of thought. He will think whatever thought he wishes to think and he will not think any thought that he does not wish to think."[5] This seems to be an instant course in a very effective cognitive psychology.

The methods also lend themselves to brief writing prompts. Think of a thought or habitual thought formation that you would like to work on. What negative and harmful associations tend to arise for you when you confront certain people, situations, or stimuli? Title the exercise with a typical bad thought you have in quotes. Then work through the following prompts, which will manifest the ideas presented in *The Removal of Distracting Thoughts* sutra.

Removing the Thought: "________________"

1. What is the antidote thought to your negative thought? Write a simple affirmation that reflects the positive, opposite point of view. Then copy your affirmation over four more times to reinforce its dominance over the negative thought.

2. What are the dangers of this thought? Write a bit about the logical outcomes of your negative thought and maybe some historical outcomes you remember. Describe how this thought can infiltrate and affect your mood, mind, and behaviors.

3. Don't write anything. This step is just dropping and not feeding the thought with attention. Go on.

4. Ask deeper analytic and contextual questions about your thought. How did you develop this thought or pattern? When did you first notice it and what tends to trigger it? Why do you think those triggers bring up this negativity? What specific emotions and physical feelings accompany the thought? What experiences in your life have brought up those feelings? Write an analysis of this thought's development in your life.

5. Write a little parable, or story, with an analogy to thought crushing. It could be an animal story, it could use fairy tale images, or it could use something mechanical like a wrecking ball. Let loose and write a little tale where there is a physical victory for the forces of good thoughts.

Writing with each method will help you get a feel for what the Buddha meant when he said to really try these techniques. He anticipated some therapeutic ideas that wouldn't appear in the West for another 2,500 years. You might not need to utilize each method, but with these small samples, you might find useful ideas for the next time negativity is triggered. Which method did you like the best? Keep that in your cognitive pocket and it is very likely to be helpful.

Section 4, Exercise 5—Constructing a Tetralemma and the Middle Way

If a dilemma is an unresolvable issue of two forces, a *tetralemma* is an unresolvable structure of four, and it is also an important concept in early Buddhist philosophy. This structure first appeared in a text called *The Entry into the Middle Way* by Candrakirti in the early seventh century, but its philosophical basis could be traced to another famous Buddhist philosopher, Nagarjuna, in a first century text called *Root Verses on the Middle*.[1] These great sages articulated what became an important philosophical school in Buddhism, especially in Tibet, if not actually a defined sect. The school was called the Mādhyamika, and it had great influence on Mahāyāna Buddhism.[2]

The Middle Way is illustrated in its philosophical complexity by the design of the tetralemma. Middle Way does not mean averaging things out or developing an internal democracy. Middle Way is an effort to avoid the oversimplification of dualism. The Middle Way avoids entrapment in duality by experiencing context and broadening perspective.

The tetralemma is a mind-boggling little chart of four squares that lays out an impossibility in dualistic thinking. The essential form of the tetralemma takes any dualism, stated, for example, that it has to be A or B. The tetralemma form tells us that the answer is not A, the answer is not B, the answer is not both A and B, and the answer is not neither A nor B. All of our logical but dualistic positions are wiped out. Mādhyamika philosophy thrived on doing that, deconstructing set logic to show broader views and contexts. They undermined dualism to open up the world.

One illustration Candrakirti used in his text involved a seed and a sprout to address issues of causation. Are a seed and a sprout the same or different? A seed becomes a sprout but a seed still remains something different from a sprout and isn't the actual cause of the sprout.[3] Where is the causation line between a seed and a sprout? They aren't exactly the same and they aren't exactly different.

This philosophy is confusing and really meant to be. To go further into the awareness that hopefully evolves from the confusion, in this exercise you can design your own tetralemma. Take a conflict inside your mind that bounces around and doesn't seem to resolve. It could be something interpersonal like two people with opposing opinions who can both sway you. Or it could be two opposing feelings you have about the same thing or person. Or it could be some defining aspect of yourself, such as gender identity or introversion/extroversion, where you can really feel both sides.

Call one side of your dilemma A and one side B and you will expand it into a tetralemma. In the chart that follows, fill in each box with a brief description of what it would be like if that were the only and total truth. For instance, the lower left box is “A true, B not true.” So what if that one friend A was totally right? The upper left box is “A true and B true.” So how could that possibly work and what would that look like if somehow both friend A and friend B were really right? Where both are untrue, consider the possibility that even this dualism could have a third or completely unexpected answer. Remember that this is all impossible for the logical mind and that the underlying concept is that none of the squares represents the whole truth. Just try to put a little imagination into a scenario in each square to show yourself that none of them are “right.”

My Own Tetralemma

	A Is TRUE	A Is NOT True
B Is TRUE		
B Is NOT True		

Essentially what we see here is that the duality of true and not true itself isn’t working too well. Whatever you plug in, you can imagine something with some possibility for reality in each square and at the same time, no square’s content resounds perfectly and ends the tension. The Mādhyamika philosophy says that nothing exists forever and nothing doesn’t exist, so, basically, we have to get beyond saying either/or. When we can really feel that, in rare moments of relaxation of our overly rational minds, we are

more open to the multidimensionality of our universe internally and externally. Of course, internal and external aren’t so clear either, and that’s also an interesting duality to plug into the impossible tetralemma.

Section 4, Exercise 6—Meditation Motivation and The Way of the Bodhisattva

The Way of the Bodhisattva is a long, profound poem written by the Indian scholar Shantideva in the early 700s. Its philosophical stance evolved from the school that produced Candrakirti, who was discussed in Exercise 5 of this section. The poem itself, a treatise on the philosophy, underpinnings, and ethical practice of Buddhism, influenced this school and became the embodiment of the Mahāyāna school of Buddhism. The Mahāyāna school focuses on the idea that enlightenment is never singular, that the awakening of one person contributes to the awareness of the world, and that no person’s awakening is complete until all people have been enlightened.[1]

The beauty and importance of this poem cannot be overestimated. A statement by His Holiness the Dalai Lama is on the cover of the recent edition of *The Way of the Bodhisattva* by Shambhala Publishers: “If I have any understanding of compassion and the practice of the bodhisattva path, it is entirely on the basis of this text that I possess it.” That is a serious endorsement. Besides the depth of intelligence and wisdom in this poem, it contains some stanzas whose poetry brings Buddhist intensity right into the heart:

From birdsong and the sighing of the trees,

From shafts of light and from the sky itself,

May living beings, each and every one,

Perceive the constant sound of Dharma.[2]

Although the poem is philosophically dense in parts and morally rigorous, the heart of it is pure and total generosity.

My body, thus, and all my goods besides,

And all my merits gained and to be gained,

I give them all and do not count the cost,

To bring about the benefit of beings.[3]

The Way of the Bodhisattva became very popular and central in Tibetan Buddhism, but its ethical roots can be seen running deep in original Buddhism. The essential ethical base of Buddhism underpins all awakening and there is no enlightenment separate from it. This is built into the philosophy.

The Western incorporation of Buddhism may gloss over this aspect of the practice in the excitement about the practice's therapeutic benefits for individuals. The underlying point is that therapeutic benefits spread. When one life opens and becomes more in touch and positive, everything and everyone around that life feels some influence of the change. This is a kind of inadvertent altruism.

At times, it is important to arouse the intention of a more specifically generous motivation. Buddhist rituals of dedicating merit or developing and sharing loving-kindness or compassion are important in many schools and in general Buddhist ethics. Rituals of generosity are reminders that we are incredibly fortunate to be even thinking about enlightenment or having the time, inclination, or well-being to be able to work on improving our own minds.

In this exercise, you will write your way from here to there, from the idea of your own improvement to a generous and unbounded compassion. The first step is to look closely at the equivalence of those two ideas. You will write about ways that your personal betterment spreads. On the next page, think through exactly what your vision of your personal improvement is and how you see that affecting the smaller and then bigger world around you. Stretch the limits beyond your own life's parameters, like that saying that a butterfly moving her wings in China affects the whole world. The heading for your written piece is, "When I Am Better, Then.…"

There are (at least) three formats that would work well for this idea. First, you might do a free write and just associate to the idea and build the imagery around your positive development. Second, this idea works well with a bubble chart, where you write a phrase indicating your improvement in a circle in the center and then you draw branches off of your circle with more circles at the end of each branch. In each of those

circles, you write a phrase about spinoffs or effects of you feeling and being better, and then let each or some of those circles also have branches and tertiary spinoffs. Continue with this branching and describing of positive impact for as long as you can. The third format starts like the bubble, with a circle describing the central aspect of you developing, but then you draw concentric rings around that circle. In each ring, consider and describe a broadening influence of your positivity and compassion, maybe in your family, community, town or city, state, country, world, galaxy, and so on. However you lay out this connection, write about the inherent correlation between your own improvement and other positive possibilities.

When I Am Better, Then …

Most people can know that their improvement helps the world, but a Bodhisattva is especially motivated by that fact. Thinking this through helps put it front and center and reminds us that our efforts are stronger when our motivation is broader. Every time we meditate, study, or set intentions for truer ground and broader vision, we can remember that our work is for all people, not just us.

To finish this thoughtful shift, consider dedicating the merit of this exercise to someone or a group of beings. In old-fashioned Buddhist terms, karmic merit accumulates through these good and effortful deeds, and in Bodhisattva terms, we can give it away. If you wish, you can give a bow or gassho and say, "I dedicate the merit of this effort to …

________________."

Section 4, Exercise 7—Your Own Koan

Many people have heard of the Zen Buddhist *koan* with its reputation of being an insolvable puzzle and mind-boggling riddle. It is those things, but koan study is also an intensive Buddhist practice, developed in China starting in the seventh century. Koans developed from *public cases*—dialogues between Chan (Chinese for Zen) masters and students that were elaborated with introductions, commentaries, and verse. A koan is a story and a mystery, written in enigmatic language that challenges linear thinking and breaks down thought formations. Koans do not make sense in the logical world, but they have been studied throughout the centuries as their particularly powerful phrases unlock rigidity of the mind.

Koan study is by nature infinite, since each part of each case keeps unfolding with more and more pondering. There are many Buddhist tales of monks meditating for years or eons on a single phrase of a koan, such as the famous one about the sound of one hand clapping, a lifetime insight from the monk Hakuin. Translated collections of koans and commentaries are available, such as *The Book of Equanimity: Illuminating Classic Zen Koans* by Gerry Shishin Wick, *The Gateless Gate: The Classic Book of Zen Koans* by Koun Yamada, or *The Blue Cliff Record* by Thomas Cleary. Koan study relies on the interaction of student and teacher, in its content, and in practice also. Teachers guide koan study to help people keep moving in the intensity of living with the koan's enigmatic nature.

To give the slightest flavor of koans, here are a few quotes from "Case 77, Kyozan Holds His Own," from *The Book of Equanimity*.[1] In the "Preface to the Assembly," some general comments are made, starting with, "It's like a man who tries to draw emptiness. No sooner does he use the writing brush then he goes wrong." We are off to a bad start it seems. Whatever we say, in the very act of saying it, we have missed something essential about pervasive emptiness. Then in the "Main Case," a monk asks Kyozan, the master, if he knows characters. He says, "I hold my own," and Kyozan and the monk proceed to draw symbols on the ground between them and walk around them. In the end, Kyozan approves of the monk's pantomime of being a fierce temple guardian and remarks, "Just so! Just so! Keep it and maintain it well."

The “Appreciatory Verse” follows, noting

> The void inside the ring of the Way is never filled;
>
> the character for the seal of emptiness has never been revealed.

We return to the fact of emptiness and our inability to ever express what it is. The commentary that follows tells an interesting story of Kyozan burning his esoteric and valuable texts because he knows them perfectly, meaning not only that he can reproduce them at will, but that he has embodied them and their specific words are no longer relevant to him.

This is a drop of a koan and its story and language as an example, but koans do have a way of working with a kind of bibliomancy, like Tarot cards. People frequently find a curious relevance in the koan before them, and koans’ mysterious symbolism can have a way of plugging into deep current realities. Sojun Diane Martin, a Zen teacher of the Soto lineage, suggests a practice of writing your own koan, and that will be the current exercise. Many koans are online if you want to get a deeper feel for the form.

To write your koan, you will use the standard form from *The Book of Equanimity*, starting with a “Preface to the Assembly,” then a “Main Case,” then an “Appreciatory Verse.” It is simplest to think of the “Preface” as an abstract stating of a problem. Think of a problem in your own development or practice, and pose it in poetic terms, maybe something like describing a branch falling off a tree if you feel like you are losing something in your life or practice; or you might describe two butting rams if you are feeling strong internal conflict. Besides using imagery, you might also restate your problem in formulaic terms of math or science, or just write about how the problem feels in psychological language.

In your koan, you can use terms of the ancient koans, with monks in robes for characters, or feel free to modernize it and write about your job, or neighborhood, or current events, or use animal or fanciful characters.

For the “Main Case,” write a short dialogue between a master and a student, or between any two people, and let both voices be part of you working over the problem in the “Preface.”

Finally, try your hand at a short verse or poem at the end that sums up what was learned or how the two people influenced each other. Feel free to add commentary if you want to note your observations about the koan itself. Let your koan be dynamic and associative and the power of its magic is likely to come through.

Preface to the Assembly:

Main Case:

Master (or any character)—

Student (or any character)—

Master—

Student—

Appreciatory Verse:

Commentary?

Koans can be fun and poetic as well as maddening and confusing. They are a uniquely Buddhist type of story, combining the elements of poetry, drama, and analysis in a way that inevitably yields surprise and refreshment. Clarity isn’t always available, but sometimes things feel more real without making so much more sense.

Section 4, Exercise 8—A Wholehearted Response to Eihei Dogen's "Wholehearted Practice of the Way"

Eihei Dogen was an extraordinary Zen monk of the early thirteenth century who left Japan to study in China and then returned to reform Japanese Zen practice. Of all of the intense writing in Buddhism, Dogen's work stands out for a kind of spiritual inventiveness. Dogen is a poet and uses words to do more than carry meaning; his writing is the most dynamic event that can ride on a linguistic current.

In one particular spiritual essay, written in 1231, Dogen describes his journeys and his vision for a purified Zen practice, a practice that returns to the simplicity of *zazen*, "just sitting," and forsakes competitive and overly intellectual teachings. This fascicle is called *Bendōwa: Talk on Wholehearted Practice of the Way*.[1] From the title on, *Bendōwa* delivers something special for being so plain. It is about how to really practice, not a particular practice but a total practice. It is relatively easy to study methods of practice but not to find wholehearted participation. This is where many of us struggle, not to find something to be in but to be in it all the way.

The very first paragraph of *Bendōwa* ends with an amazing statement: "This wondrous dharma, which has been transmitted only from Buddha to Buddha without deviation, has as its criterion jijuyūzanmai."[2] This sentence needs some unpacking and translating. The translators of the book write a note of almost an entire page explaining *jijuyūzanmai*. It literally means the concentration of self-fulfillment. It is an ability to focus on truly filling the moment that is. They explain that the self here is not opposed to an object, but an unbounded experience that "simply receives and accepts its function, or spiritual position in the world.… This is not an experience that is somewhere other than here and now."[3] Dogen's words express the truth of truly and fully being, and that this is the legacy of the Buddhist lineage.

This concept, and words trying to explain it, are an ideal that is hard to find in experience. When we sit in meditation, we are bombarded by extraneous processes that demand attention. Off of the cushion, there are exponentially more. In study, the reasoning mind can doubt in the speculative way that is seen as a hindrance in Buddhism, as opposed to the *Great Doubt*, which is the beneficial power of questioning and curiosity. Wholeheartedness isn't about conviction in any particular doctrine but involvement in and intimacy with the present moment. Wholeheartedness is not easy to come by.

When searching for an ideal, writing can create an opening or pathway, so it can only help to write about wholehearted experience, the freedom of existing, totally and fully, with nothing left over and nothing missing.

One way to approach this for this exercise is to write a list of wholehearted experiences of your own, where there was a kind of freedom and joy in the pure involvement in something.

Think of specific memories, from any time in your life, where you felt such a flow of experience that you forgot the distinctness of a self. These experiences might be very small, like seeing a pebble in water, or very large and prolonged, like a phase in a relationship, or helping a child learn to read. They may be moments in a studied creative endeavor, or surprises where expectations were suddenly shattered. Try to think of as many varied ideas as you can.

Experiences of Jijuyūzanmai, Wholehearted Involvement

1. ________________

2. ________________

3. ________________

4. ________________

5. ________________

6. 6. ________________

7. ________________

8. ________________

9. ________________

10. ________________

11. ________________

Again, after you've really searched for one more idea, look over your list of experiences and take a deep breath. Ask yourself what the items have in common, or what underlying feeling or physical sensation runs through the items. Does your list have themes in terms of setting, era of your life, or interpersonal context? What does it feel like to read the list?

Now, based on that review, write your own definition of the feeling of being wholehearted. What does it feel like to you when you are so present that you aren't aware of that fact and so caught up in something that you are totally free?

My Own Sense of Jijuyūzanmai:

Hold on to that sense and the more you articulate it and think of its applications, the more it will appear.

Section 4, Exercise 9—Pure Land Vision

Pure Land Buddhism is an interesting sect that evolved to a distinct and unique type of practice within the Buddhist world. Some of the ideas from this branch of practice derive from Indian and Chinese sutras as old as fifth century CE, but the school was formalized in the late twelfth century by the founder Jōdo Shinshū. It is popularly practiced in East Asia today.

The idea behind Pure Land Buddhism is that Buddhas are present at all times and teaching in “buddha fields” or “pure lands,” where conditions are extremely favorable for practice of the dharma. That idea isn’t so unique to Pure Land Buddhism, but the conclusions drawn may be. The practice believes that our hopes for development are outside of us, within the Buddhas, and that the practice of *nembutsu*, or calling on the Buddhas by name, is the sole way to liberation. The phrase *Namu Amida Butsu* is repeated as a way to focus and call to the Buddhas who are in the Pure Lands, asking that they bring us to a Pure Land once our lives are over.[1]

The phrase *Pure Land* sounds like a vision of heaven, but it points us in a specific direction that is not necessarily about pleasantness. It is about conditions of practice. It is an interesting qualifier for what we seek; not that things are easy and light, but that they are amenable for learning and purifying our minds. Whatever focus of practice we use, we are seeking good conditions for the dharma in our efforts. In a sense, we are in a Pure Land right now, because we are focusing with intent to approach dharma, to use writing and words to open broader realities.

In this exercise, you will describe your own Pure Land vision in the terms of the best setup for your own path and then condense it into a mantra. Your description can be in prose or a list, but think about what brings you forward the most; what helps you move in directions that are beneficial to yourself and others. This could be very practical, like having time off from work or a comfortable desk. Or, it could be more intangible, like distance from emotional trauma or help of ancestors if those are things that you feel are helpful. You may even include some suffering, as that does tend to drive practice. Your description may be poetic and have a heavenly tone, but the focus is directional and not static.

My Pure Land Vision

Your list or description can be a type of affirmation or a building of a positive possibility. By thinking it through and increasing your awareness, you may bring yourself closer to it, or you may see variables in your life and world that you can tweak to make the Pure Land more real.

To find your mantra, just read your description and circle or highlight what you see as the most potent, telling phrase. Try to keep it to just a few words that capture something essential and ring true to you. This is your Pure Land mantra. Write it down a few times and keep it in your mind for a while to see if it opens your path possibilities even more.

My Pure Land mantra: ________________

Section 4, Exercise 10—Buddhism, the Brain, and Your Practice

In this section, we have sampled the slightest bit of the range of Buddhism's scope. Buddhism means many different things to different people, and it has a great historical breadth across centuries and continents and a profound depth of thought and experience. As Buddhism develops, it changes, and a uniquely therapeutic view seems to have been cultivated in current American Buddhism.

Although concrete medical improvement is a result of many Buddhist practices, the ballast of the practices is the understanding of their context and meaning. Meditation's therapeutic benefits have been researched for over half a century, and there is a general consensus in the scientific community that meditation and mindfulness practices have benefits for "productivity, learning and health."[1] A recent view of the popular website of Harvard Medical School has headlines on research showing that meditation may ease anxiety and stress, be beneficial for the heart, and have more therapeutic value than vacations![2]

An excellent article summarizing the history of meditation research by Joseph Loizzo describes the brain changes in meditation as "use-dependent neural plasticity."[3] The brain changes when it practices differently. Most people with a regular meditation or mindfulness practice will articulate therapeutic benefits as part of the practice. We are clear that meditation changes the brain and therefore the person, but how does that information change how we practice meditation?

The ancient Buddhists were aware of the brain as an organ but located the base of mind consciousness in the heart. The base of the mind element and mind consciousness is a small pool of blood in a heart chamber. This seems to provide a corrective for being overly concrete about the brain and the practice.[4] Bhikkhu Bodhi, a world *Abhidharma* scholar, sees this statement as a deeper valuing of the mind's true power source, not just its mechanics.[5] The brain is helped by meditation and mindfulness practices, but the mind is much more than the brain and the practices are more than

exercises in neural plasticity. The benefits of practice accrue across all of these dimensions.

In this exercise, you will simply answer one very complex question: **What does your practice mean to you?** Practice might mean a writing practice, mindfulness practice, meditation practice, or Buddhist religious practice. It might refer to a developed or developing practice. What it means to you is an open field to examine at this present moment: meaning might include depth of perception, range of benefits, context in your life, experiences of development or awakening or liberation, and development of compassion. Let yourself write before thinking it through entirely and let your writing flow freely about your current and hoped-for meanings.

What My Practice Means to Me

What you wrote, from the heart base, could be revisited periodically, because, whatever your practice, its meaning will evolve. There is no final statement on this point, as the practice itself keeps expanding and deepening in impact. What you do keeps influencing intention, as intention contributes to practice, in endless interdependence.

Postscript

A TRUE practice is a repeated activity with mystery. We pick something that suits us and we do it over and over again, but it's really not so much because we think we are going to get it perfect, or even exactly right. It's more because the repetition silhouettes the changes, and the format of constancy lulls us into the best surprises when the internal continuity breaks up. Because we keep doing the same thing, the fact that it's never the same keeps yielding the surprise we need.

We need that surprise to keep our eyes and hearts open. We need that jolt when our sitting practice isn't what we expect or when our own words fly up into our eyes and minds as if they came from somewhere else. And they did. The more we rely on the structure of writing, the clearer it is that the inspiration of the writing, its true source, is not in our pens or keyboards, our hands or even our brains. These are its vehicles, but they are not it. The source is beyond the practice.

It takes a lot of practice to get beyond trying to do it right and to get into letting it true up, reflect broader reality plainly. The nature of the practice matters less than the intent to be authentic and open, receptive to whatever happens. That is hard to do. Reinforcements do tend to arrive in the nick of time, rarely from the direction in which we are looking.

It's natural to look straight ahead and think self-centrically. But, the reinforcements for a sincere practice don't tend to conform to those angles. They are dynamic, kaleidoscopic, and extremely fresh. However you use meditation and mindfulness techniques, writing, or the exercises in this book, may your adventurous and effortful practices cause every moment to burst with that freshness.

Notes

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